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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

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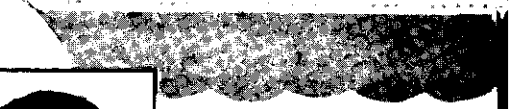

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Do you know anyone who checks and double checks everything he does? Who locks a door, walks off a few paces, then wonders if the door is really *locked, knows in his heart that it is but can't help worrying that* perhaps *it isn't, then, feeling a little sheepish, turns around, goes back to the door and tries the doorknob, only to find that the door has been securely locked all the time, just as he was sure it would be — that is, ninety-nine and nine-tenths sure . . . In some people this is a nervous condition, a sign of an anxiety complex. Well, here is a story by Roy Vickers about just such a man. Peter Curwen always made sure — that was his "system." Until his wife made a grievance of it . . .*

LITTLE THINGS LIKE THAT

by ROY VICKERS

PETER CURWEN WAS EVERY BIT AS sane as we are. No repressions, no unmentionable cravings. If you were looking for faults, you might have said that he lacked repose. He was one of those men who can never really sit still and are generally fidgeting with something. But you couldn't have made a grievance of it, as his wife did.

Most wives would have taken no notice — that is, most sensible, give-and-take wives such as Marion. Her enemies, if she had any, could hardly have picked on a flaw in her character worth mentioning. Nor could Peter — though he might have admitted to himself that, after three years of marriage, the sweetness of her nature had mellowed along lines he could not have predicted. True, she still took pains to delight his eye at all hours and that he still paid her dress bills with gratitude. Their flat in Kensington was tasteful and homelike. She had a sufficiency of the domestic virtues. But she did make a grievance of his little foible.

Of course, there was more in it than simply fidgeting and not sitting still. About one night in five he would get out of bed in the small hours to make sure he had turned off the light in the sitting-room. He would find pins on floors. Halfway to a theatre, he would wriggle and mutter that he was making sure he hadn't forgotten the tickets. Multiply that sort of thing to cover most of the small activities in which there is a chance of forgetting or mishandling something, and you have Peter Curwen.

Crisis came — unrecognized as such — at breakfast on the first Tuesday in March, which was an extremely windy day. Even the well-set windows of the Kensington flat rattled now and then. Marion, like any other

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woman who dresses constructively, did not like windy days.

As Peter finished his coffee, he put the coffee spoon on the plate that contained the debris of his toast and marmalade. Marion had first noticed that little trick on their honeymoon — which meant that she had noticed it at about a thousand breakfasts.

"Peter! Why do you always put your coffee spoon on your plate like that?"

"I dunno, dear. I suppose I do it to make sure it isn't mistaken for a clean spoon."

"I think you ought to see a psychiatrist. I mean it, Peter. There are so many little things like that. The bath taps, for instance — the stoppers of the whiskey bottles — all that ritual when you park the car. I have sung my little song about it — quite often, frankly — but I suppose you've forgotten. Forgetting is one of the symptoms."

"Symptoms of what?"

"I can't remember the name for it. Something that means excessive anxiety about trifles — when it wouldn't matter if they went wrong. They never do go wrong. The light always *has* been turned off. The stoppers always *are* airtight. The taps *never* drip. The thing is growing on you, Peter."

"There isn't a 'thing' to grow. Part of it is habit. But the main idea is deliberate. There's a system in it. I started it as a result of something that happened when I was in the Navy —"

"Darling, you really *have* told me how the signaling officer's suspenders fused something or other and caused the sinking — or was it the burning? — of the corvette. But that's a long time ago. And if you took another corvette and some more suspenders, you couldn't make it happen again. It was a freak accident. And, I mean, if you're like this at 34, what will you be like at 50?"

"My system has paid off in business —"

"People are beginning to notice, and that's not very nice for me. People laugh at too much fussiness. Why, you can't even help me into an evening cloak without feeling the hem, to make sure my heel won't catch in it."

"I didn't know you had noticed. I oughtn't to let it touch — us. I'm sorry, Marion."

"Peter! I didn't altogether mean to say that — oh, it was beastly of me!" She would have burst into tears of contrition, but this was unnecessary because, at this period, he was a good-tempered man who readily forgave almost anybody for almost anything.

"The charge of fussiness stands," he said, while he was kissing her. "I promise I'll overhaul the system right away."

"You'll never remember, darling, but it's sweet of you to want to."

Outside the flat he was about to shake the door, to make sure that the Yale lock had caught, when he snatched his hand away. Salute to

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Marion! Three years of married life and still monstrously attractive at breakfast time! Wriggling a little as he made sure that he had not forgotten his latchkey, his note case, and his fountain pen, he entered the elevator.

If a prowling cracksman, he reflected on the way down, were to test the door and find it insecurely fastened, he would enter the flat, sandbag Marion, gag her clumsily, and perhaps suffocate her. It wouldn't take a minute to get back into the elevator and make sure the door was locked.

In a couple of seconds he had decided against going back. He had promised to overhaul his system. A pity, because it was a good system. Admittedly, the risk of disaster in any given case was minute. But why take even a minute risk of disaster when you need not? Still, in marriage, each side has to make concessions of principle. As he stepped into the street he removed his hat and carried it, to make sure it would not be blown away — it was a windy day.

The system, even if he overworked it a little, had contributed to his success. He had made a niche for himself as a shipping agent, specializing in art objects and merchandise of a costly and fragile nature. By his own methods he had reduced loss and damage to a minimum, with the result that the insurance companies wafted business in his direction. In five years he had twice moved to larger premises.

It so happened on this windy and vexatious morning that he received a claim for damage which he believed to be fraudulent. He rang his lawyers and by 11 was walking the few hundred yards to their office in Hedgecutter Street. The lawyers occupied two floors in Sebastopol House, a dingy Victorian building with a wastefully large entrance hall of unredeemable dinginess. The partners communicated with each other by means of a number of speaking-tubes, the forerunner of the house telephone. But their fees were high and their efficiency had been a catchword for three generations.

He was delighted when they advised him to fight. In the hall, on the way out, he lobbed a half-finished cigarette into a huge brass vase, placed there for the purpose. He had walked a dozen paces into the wind before the system stopped him short.

He had thrown the cigarette into the vase, but had not actually seen it land. Lots of fires — some fires, anyhow — were caused by half-finished cigarettes thrown carelessly away. Suppose he had missed the vase? Suppose the half-finished cigarette had rolled along the floor, then slipped through a chink in the boards? On a windy day like this, that old-fashioned building would burn like matchboard. He flashed up a pageant of disaster. The traffic cordoned off, the police holding back the crowd of morbid sightseers. He could hear the fire gongs, the cries of the doomed in the upper floors. Why not slip

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back and make sure about that cigarette?

"I have no reason to believe that I missed the vase — a great big vat like that! It's simply that I don't want to alter the system. And I promised Marion I would. Well, got to begin somewhere!"

It was not the wind alone that made walking back to his office a trudging labor. The slight feeling of guilt stayed with him until he went out for lunch. His way took him past the corner of Hedgecutter Street. No fire gongs. No police. No morbid sightseers.

He let out a long breath.

"I mustn't get worked up like that again! The system cut out all worry. Better watch my step, or I shall get nervy."

Having thus warned himself, he was free to enjoy lunch with a director of the insurance company whose support he secured in resisting the claim for damage.

On the way back after lunch his eye traveled over a display in one of Hoffmeister's windows, came to rest on a purse comb in tortoiseshell. It would be fun to give it to Marion, in token that their little misunderstanding at breakfast time had been rubbed out. He gave his name and business address. If they would send the comb during the afternoon he would pay the messenger in currency. The manager insisted on his taking the comb and sending a check at his convenience. Curwen thanked him and placed the comb — unwrapped — in his breast-pocket — inside his note case, to make sure it would not be crushed.

Approaching Hedgecutter Street, he caught the unmistakable echo of a fire gong. At the corner, the traffic was cordoned off. The fire brigade was in action and the police were holding back the crowd of sightseers. Sebastopol House was in flames.

In his first confusion, Peter Curwen had the sense of being cheated — as if he had been promised that there would be no fire. While he gaped his eye took in detail. Above the flames, seen intermittently through the smoke, a man was standing on a window sill on the top floor, steadying himself with one hand on the gable. The escape ladder was swaying towards him. When it reached the edge of the window sill, the man loosened his hold on the gable, stooped for the ladder, and overbalanced. Curwen shut his eyes. His mind stepped back some three hours. He saw himself standing in the wind a dozen yards from Sebastopol House, hesitating.

"If I had gone back, that man would be alive now."

Back in his office, he steadied himself. He was as able to distinguish fact from fantasy as anybody else. It would be hysterical to jump to the conclusion that he had caused the fire. That long sequence about the half-finished cigarette falling through a chink in the floorboards, and the rest of it, had been fantasy. The mathematical chances against all that

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having happened were enormous. Admittedly, he had suspected that the cigarette might have missed the vase, but that did not mean that it had actually done so. His suspicion had been created by the system. As Marion had pointed out, these systematic suspicions were uneconomical. The light always *had* been turned off. The taps never *did* leak. Judgment, therefore, could be suspended.

The afternoon editions weakened the mathematical part of the argument by stating that the fire was believed to have started between the hall and the basement.

Now and again there came sharp mental images of Marion. Of Marion at breakfast, complaining about the system. Of himself giving way, against his better judgment. Of himself hesitating on the wind-swept pavement . . . *better go back and make sure about that cigarette . . . but I promised Marion . . . well, got to begin somewhere.* Begin — oh, God! — begin with the fire gong. Steady!

He decided to say nothing to Marion about the fire. He was not thinking about her feelings — Marion wouldn't have any feelings about someone else's fire. Intuition warned him that it would be better for himself if the fire were never discussed with her.

"Sebastopol House has been gutted! There's a whole column about it," said Marion as soon as he came home. "But I expect you know, as it's so near the office."

"I saw it when I came back from lunch." As long as he kept close to the newspaper reports, there should be no danger. "I was there when that man fell."

"Poor darling! How upsetting for you! No wonder you look limp. Go and sit down and I'll bring you a drink."

The hall lounge was warm and cosy. He sat down, under inward protest. He must be very careful about drink, now — never allow himself to get the very slightest degree fuddled.

"We've nothing on tonight," Marion was saying, "so you can have a good rest."

Normally, he enjoyed a quiet evening at home. Tonight he felt an undefined reluctance to be alone with Marion. He drank the whiskey at a gulp.

"I'm not tired. I was going to suggest that we look in at the Parnassus after dinner."

In his dressing room he took out his note case, stared at the tortoiseshell purse comb, until he remembered buying it to placate Marion. Why did that now seem so contemptible? He glanced at the communicating door, then furtively slipped the comb into a drawer, under a pile of handkerchiefs.

The spiritual vulgarity of his action shocked him into momentary suspicion of himself. He was, he reminded himself, a free agent. If he wished, say, to turn back a dozen yards or so, for any purpose whatever, no one could prevent him. If

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he did not wish to turn back, the choice was exclusively his own, for which he would bear exclusive responsibility. Further discussion of this subject would be unnecessary.

The inquest, as far as Peter Curwen was concerned, was far from satisfactory. The deceased, Henry Morprill, was a clerk, in the middle thirties, employed by a manufacturer's agent occupying the top floor. The manner in which he had met his death was not in dispute. The police did not suggest incendiarism, nor was there any evidence that anyone had been culpably careless.

"It seems to have been one of those fires that have no detectable cause," said the Coroner. "It was a very windy day. A live cigarette end, or a spark from a distant chimney, might have been blown through a ventilator and carried to the space between the ground floor and the ceiling of the basement. We shall probably never know for certain. We are not, however, concerned with the fire, as such."

Peter Curwen had attended the court with something approaching confidence that the fire would be attributed to a half-finished cigarette falling outside the brass vase. The protracted doubt was attacking the flank of his defenses.

Direct inquiry of the experts would be impossible because he had sustained no financial loss in the fire. Using his connection with the insurance companies, he contrived a drink with the fire assessor concerned.

"An incendiary generally leaves something for us to work on," said the assessor. "But a straight fire — I should say about a third of 'em have to be left to inspired guesswork. A man may do something slightly dangerous every day for twenty years, and suddenly it starts a fire."

"In the hall —"

"The wind may be blowing at an angle it's never blown at before. Freak combination of small factors. This is a case in point."

"In the hall," said Curwen, "there was a large vase. People would lob half-finished cigarettes into it as they passed. Now, suppose a cigarette missed the vase, rolled through a chink in the floorboards —"

"Could be. It's as likely as anything else. That's what I meant by inspired guess. Let's have another drink."

The doubt was now securely entrenched. When he had parted from the assessor, Curwen pinched a cigarette in half. He lobbed one half at a litter bin — and missed.

That night they were booked for a dinner party. When he opened the drawer for a handkerchief, he remembered that under the pile lay the tortoiseshell comb. He felt unable to cope with the complicated vibrations set up by that comb. He lifted a handkerchief as if he feared to disturb the pile. It could lie buried until he had focused the death of that clerk.

That it was a poor hiding place did not occur to him. Like many a man in his circumstances he put his soiled

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linen in a basket and was incurious as to the processes by which it eventually reappeared in a chest of drawers.

He kept his end up at the dinner party. Afterwards, Marion was quieter than usual. She had perceived that the climate of their marriage had somehow changed.

The coroner's jury had expressed sympathy with the widow and had felt the better for it. The widow — the half-finished cigarette — sympathy! The doubt was a haunting abstraction, but the widow was an inescapable actuality. He wrote to her, on office paper bearing his name. He asserted that he was under a moral obligation to her late husband — the nature of which he was not at liberty to divulge — that he proposed to call on her on the following day to inquire whether he could be of any service to her.

He was glad they had another dinner engagement that night. It was as if he were afraid of being alone with Marion. The pile of handkerchiefs in his drawer was considerably higher. He did not know that Marion always placed in-coming handkerchiefs at the bottom of the pile.

At breakfast the next morning he stopped with the coffee spoon halfway to his plate. He put it back in the saucer, then stole a glance at Marion.

"I'm so glad you're trying," she said. "It'll come easier after a while."

He felt fury so sudden and so intense that he left the room and did not return. Before leaving the flat, he went to his dressing room, took the tortoiseshell comb from under the pile of handkerchiefs, and later put it into his office safe.

By lunch time his calm had returned. Indeed, he was on the verge of good spirits as his thoughts dwelt on his coming interview with Mrs. Morprill. A clerk's widow would be faded and poor — or at least shabby-genteel — faced with a hundred financial anxieties. It would be balm to his lacerated conscience to smooth her path through life. His success in business would acquire an added sweetness.

Gormer's Green, where the widow lived, was some twelve miles out, a part of London unknown to him. He left the office shortly after 4. On emerging from the underground, he groped his way in a maze of five-roomed semi-detached houses of identical pattern.

At first glance, Mrs. Morprill was fairly close to his mental picture of her, except that she was tall and did not droop. Faded she certainly was, but her make-up was passable. She had shape, too, which survived the dowdiness of her dress. Her eyes were calm and friendly.

"It was so kind of you to write, Mr. Curwen. Do please come in. I expect you could do with a cup of tea, after that long walk from the station."

Her voice was soft and her speech was free from affectation. She showed him into the parlor-dining-room and

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left him while she prepared tea. The furniture was mass produced, the carpet was garish, and the pictures he thought awful. But a homemade bookcase gave a pleasing touch of individuality.

Mrs. Morprill was not parading her grief. She made some conventional remarks to which he did his best to respond, waiting to get in with his little speech.

"Mrs. Morprill, you know why I have come here. In your bereavement, you are called upon to face a number of practical difficulties. I earnestly hope you will allow me to help."

"I'm sure I don't know how to thank you for offering, Mr. Curwen." She was unembarrassed, took his words at their face value. "But we've been living in a quite simple way, and I don't think there's really anything that isn't being taken care of, one way and another. There's less practical sort of bother than you'd think."

For Curwen it was the wrong answer. This woman was courageous, but she was feminine and would yield to the right kind of pressure.

"I'm sure you'll let me speak openly, Mrs. Morprill. Let's look squarely at the facts. To begin with, your income has been cut off."

"Oh! I didn't know you meant money help!"

"You're not offended? Please don't say you are."

"Why, of course not! I couldn't be offended at such a very kind thought. But, you see, I don't think I need any money help, thanking you most gratefully all the same.

"It isn't as though Henry had left me in the lurch," she explained. "He was a thoughtful man — clever too, though not what I'd call pushful. He paid a bit extra to the building society on the installments, and now this house becomes ours — mine, I should say. And besides that, he was insured for £1,000. And Maggie — that's our daughter — she'll be twelve next month — she's at the Grammar school I'm pleased to say, and she seems to have all the clothes and things she needs."

Curwen was losing his nerve.

"The interest on that thousand will be less than £40 a year."

"I shall go back to work. I was a typist before we married. I shall take a refresher course as soon as I've straightened my mind a bit. As to the next few weeks, they're paying his salary till the end of the month. And there's the holiday money we've saved, which we sha'n't be wanting now — for holidays, I mean."

Curwen groped vainly for a new line of appeal. This faded woman, with her soft, monotonous voice and her homely idiom, was crushing his spirit. Telling him he was a nice kind man, and would he please stop talking about money.

"Mr. Curwen, I'd like it if you would tell me something about Henry. Nothing private, I don't mean. Just little things. It won't upset me — I promise!"

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"I will tell you this about him." He faltered, feeling now that his presence in her house was a loutish intrusion. "If you would let me make you an allowance equal to his salary, I would still be in debt to your husband. And you would make me very happy indeed."

She ought to accept, or kick him out. But her eyes showed only a mild wonder.

"Your debt to him wasn't a money debt, so it can't be repaid in money," she said, forming the thought as she spoke. "I'm sorry you're unhappy about it, Mr. Curwen. I feel a bit like that about him myself. He was much kinder to me than I was to him. I'm sort of in debt to him, too."

Walking back to the underground, missing his way again, Curwen realized that his fruitless visit had substantially damaged him. He had thought of a woman deprived of a breadwinner. He had understated the case so grossly that the Doubt was beginning to lose its essential character. It was no longer of primary importance to know whether his half-lighted cigarette had in fact rolled under a chink in the floorboards and caused the fire. What if it had? The law and public opinion would pronounce it an accident — a trivial act of carelessness with an unforeseeably tragic sequel.

All very reasonable — until he remembered that he himself had set up the postulate that an act of carelessness of that kind need never and ought never to occur. That was the essence of his system, thoughtfully based on the so-called freak accident to the corvette. Like a muddled child he had rushed to the widow, begging to be allowed to buy back that moment of self-betrayal in Hedgecutter Street . . .

He reached home an hour later than usual. Marion, in a dinner dress, was waiting in the hall.

"Peter, have you forgotten that we're taking Mother to the theatre tonight and that she's due at any minute?"

He had forgotten. He tried to break out of his preoccupation.

"Sorry, dear! I'll hurry."

"I have the tickets," said Marion. "I will hand them to you at the theatre. You will remember that, won't you, and not keep feeling in all your pockets before we get there? Mother notices everything."

Again her words awoke that queer kind of anger that was new to him. It was something apart from ill-temper, indefinable and alarming.

Marion kept back dinner until he was ready. Mrs. Gardner was excessively polite about it. Service sent up a new maid, who was very slow. They reached the theatre a full minute after the curtain had risen. There were two intermissions, in each of which he had two double whiskies, which was a lot for a man of his habits.

"Mother wasn't on her best behavior," remarked Marion, after Mrs. Gardner had gone. "We started off on the wrong foot."

"My fault for being late." He was

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pouring himself a stiff one. "I stayed to clear up some arrears and didn't notice the time."

"Yes, Peter. I thought you might forget, so I rang you about 4. Miss Aspland said you had left the office and would not return."

She was making a point of his white lie. Doubtless, she was expecting further evasions. She darned well wouldn't get any.

"I was at Gormer's Green. I went to see the widow of the man who was killed in the Sebastopol House fire."

"Really? Then you knew her before? What an extraordinary coincidence!"

"I had never heard of her until the inquest. I sought her out because it is possible — I repeat, possible — that I was the indirect cause of her husband's death."

He could see that she was startled to the point of confusion. Serve her right!

"I don't understand, Peter. A man you've never heard of before falls from the top floor —"

"Stop guessing and listen." He told her of his call on the lawyers, told her in detail of his lobbing the half-finished cigarette and his uncertainty whether it had gone into the vase. He paused to drain his glass — and remembered that he had taken several whiskies at the theatre. Instantly, he sprang on guard.

"Yes — well — what next?" she prompted.

Deep, intuitive fear of himself — fear that some words, spoken out loud, might unleash something — saved him from telling her what happened next. He resented his fear and wanted to defy it. He wanted to play with fire. Play with the Sebastopol House fire. Nothing in the fire, as such. Nothing in the half-finished cigarette, as such. Nothing in the widow . . .

"The fire broke out between the ground floor and the basement." The formula for safety was to speak as if to a person other than Marion. "If my cigarette fell on the floor it is possible that I caused that fire."

Marion was at a loss. The fire story, however true in itself, did not account for that tortoiseshell comb which she had found under his handkerchiefs. She had examined it and found the Hoffmeister mark, which meant that it was as costly as it looked. This morning the comb was no longer there.

"I wish you had mentioned all this at the time — if it's the fire and nothing else that's worrying you. I can tell you positively that you did not cause that fire."

"That, my dear, is an extremely silly remark. You cannot conceivably know anything about it."

"Can't you see, Peter? It's the corvette-and-suspenders story all over again. That's why you simply must consult a psychiatrist. After all, if you'd been wounded and the wound was giving you trouble now, you'd at least ask an ordinary doctor if he could do something about it."

"So my anxiety for the widow and

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the child seems to you a mental disease which could be cured by an expert!"

Marion shrugged and left him. He chuckled with self-satisfaction. He had talked about the fire in such a way that nothing had happened except that she had gone off to bed in a huff, which she would have forgotten by morning. He had shown that he could trust himself. There would be no harm in a nightcap.

That night, after he had turned off the light in the sitting-room and got into bed, he resisted the impulse to get up and make sure the sitting-room light was off. He must play fair with Marion. For as long as they lived under the same roof he would keep his word to her.

The next morning he found that the light in the sitting-room had been left burning. So Marion was wrong! It *did* happen, sometimes. He felt excitement creeping over him, giving the illusion that he could feel the blood moving in his veins.

With a glance in the direction of Marion's room, he shut himself in the sitting-room and locked the door. He stood with his back pressed against the door, contemplating the faint glow from the light — in a reading lamp. Net result, waste of a few pence. Net result, Sebastopol House gutted and a mild-eyed widow whose image could never be banished. Generically, the two events were identical.

He crossed the room on tiptoe and switched off the lamp. He walked back to the door and turned the handle, without result. He blinked, turned the handle a second time. Then his eye fell on the key. He turned it and opened the door.

"Now why in heaven's name did I lock myself in this room?"

He could not remember why he had entered the room, could not remember what he had done after he locked the door. He had a slight headache. Too much whiskey last night — which, he decided, explained the whole thing.

He resumed his morning routine, as if nothing had happened.

At the end of a month he again journeyed to Gormer's Green and again drank tea with Mrs. Morprill. He made the acquaintance of her daughter, who was, he thought, too shy for her age. He succeeded in drawing her into an enthusiastic account of a fortunate neighbor's television set. The next day he sent the child a set. To her mother he wrote: *I respect your decision, though I regret it. A toy is not "help" in the sense of our conversation. I hope you will allow Maggie to keep the set. Children can love but they cannot mourn as we do.*

The month after that, he secured Mrs. Morprill's permission to provide Maggie with a bicycle. Through the child he was hoping to weaken the resistance of the mother. He would rake over their small talk for fragments with which to build up a picture of their life without Morprill.

His home life, seen in outline only,

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would have suggested that the curtain had fallen on the first act of their marriage. In the intermission they were stretching a little, looking about and doing their best to entertain each other.

Marion was frankly competing with the shadowy rival whose existence she had inferred from the tortoiseshell comb. That expensive trifle, she decided, was not connected with the nonsense he had talked about the fire. Whoever the girl might be, she was not making much progress. Peter was spending nearly as much time in home activities as before.

For his part, Peter believed that he had fallen out of love with her for no reason that could be summoned to his consciousness. Something had taken the place of his feelings as a husband. Some strong but undefinable attachment made him hurry home in the evenings, as if he could not bear to be without her.

In a sense, he had turned her into a stranger — a woman of whom he knew little except that she had a repertory of pretty tricks. She would chatter breezily about their friends and the trifles of their very comfortable existence. She dressed brilliantly. With color and line tempered to the occasion, she could draw his eye and renew his sense of discovery of her. He incited her to deploy her attractions. He was fascinated by his own sensitiveness to her charms — a fascination tinged with guilt, as if he had no right to be charmed by his wife.

The smoothness of this somewhat dangerous relationship was imperiled when he suddenly produced the tortoiseshell comb. It was an evening in July, the day before her birthday. The comb was in its sheath, unwrapped, exactly as she had seen it under his handkerchiefs. He dropped it into her lap.

So the shadowy rival had sent it back!

"What — what is it?" Her tone might have meant anything.

"A comb for your purse — it swivels out of that sheath."

She gazed at the comb without touching it.

"It's not the birthday present proper — that's why you're getting it tonight." Her restraint made him suspect that he had bungled somehow. "As a matter of fact, I bought that for you some months ago. I actually brought it home — then took it back to the office, for some reason." He frowned. "I can't think why."

"*Peter!* Was it at the time you were so worried about that fire?"

"Yes, it was." The fire and his own concern with it were crystal clear and always would be. He remembered coming home — taking the comb out of his note case —

"Darling, it's exactly what I wanted!" The shadowy rival was proved to be but a shadow. She enlarged on the theme of the profound usefulness of a tortoiseshell purse comb. Her sudden enthusiasm surprised him.

Why had he not given her the

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comb at the time? The fire was irrelevant. While she prattled, he tried hard to remember why he had put the comb in the office safe. He had lost the intuitive fear that, in certain circumstances, he might not be able to hold his own demons on the leash.

The leash was torn from his hand by the comparatively trivial accident of his car being stolen — more accurately, "temporarily removed from the possession of its owner," as it was found abandoned and undamaged after a couple of hours.

The next morning brought perfect summer weather. It was traditional that he should make a holiday of her birthday — traditional also that they should bathe in the sea at Honsworth Wood. They set off in the car after breakfast, packing a picnic basket.

Shortly before midday he was running the car off the coastal road onto the strip of grass that gave onto the "wood" — a score or so of stunted trees at the cliffhead, a landmark on a bleak coastline. The "ritual" of parking, of which she had so often complained, consisted of altering the leads from the distributor so that the engine could not fire a complete cycle. He was about to lift the hood, but abandoned his intention when he heard her laugh.

"I'm getting better, aren't I?" His good temper was genuine because he had forgotten that he had ever resented her objection to the system.

"You've practically cured yourself and I think you're marvelous."

They undressed in the car, put on sand-shoes, passed through the trees. At the head of the cliff, which was not sheer, there was a wooden bench which had probably never been sat on. A rough track led to the beach.

"I'm bound to get cold before you do, Peter."

"No shirking. Button that cap up properly."

It all seemed very natural and jolly. On their honeymoon he had insisted on her swimming instead of pottering. Tradition was observed, but in five minutes she was out of breath and left the water. He saw her climbing the track, watched her disappear through the trees. Some five minutes later she was sitting on the bench, still in her swimming suit, combing her hair. By this time, he was getting cold himself.

When he reached the cliffhead, she patted the bench.

"Let's sit here for a bit."

"Not without my beer. I've been doing some work."

"Then bring the basket back with you and let's have lunch here, just as we are. I'm frightfully hungry."

"Righto!" he answered over his shoulder. Idly she watched him, admiring the youthfulness of his form — he moved like an athlete of twenty. Minutes passed. When he came back through the trees, the springiness had gone out of him. And he was empty-handed.

"You've forgotten the lunch basket," she shouted when he was some thirty feet away. He made no answer and did not quicken his pace.

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"I thought we were going to have lunch here," she said, as he reached the bench.

He stared down at her.

"The car has been stolen," he said.

"What! It can't have been! I went to it when I left you, because I got my hair wet — there was no one about then." When her imagination had grasped the fact, she wailed: "With our clothes and everything! What on earth are we going to do?"

She wondered why he did not answer. He was usually calm and helpful when anything went wrong. His eyes were still on hers, but they were not focusing her.

"You can't stand there mooning about it," she grumbled. "You must do something!"

His eyes came into focus, looked at her as if with sudden recognition.

"Now, you know! It *does* happen — sometimes. What you don't know is that the lamp in the sitting-room *has* been left burning — sometimes."

"Peter!" she screamed. "Snap out of it, Peter! Let go of me!"

"The corvette *was* sunk. The fire —"

The fire gong sounded in his brain. He was conscious enough to know that he was in ecstasy and that he was killing Marion, whom he hated . . .

"Before we have it copied, Mr. Curwen, I'll run over the main points. When you last saw your wife alive, you were in the water and she was at the cliffhead, proceeding in the direction of the car?"

"Correct." Curwen was sitting at county headquarters, a police overcoat covering his swimming suit. "She had been in the water with me for about five minutes, when she said she had had enough."

"About ten minutes later," continued the superintendent, "you left the water and followed the course taken by your wife, expecting to find her waiting for you in the car? Your car was missing? You caught sight of the body of your wife lying close to where the car had been parked and partly concealed by a clump of ferns? You perceived that your wife was dead; and noticed marks on her throat suggesting to you that she had been strangled? You carried the body into the so-called wood and partly covered it with ferns, after which you waited in the road and, after a short lapse of time, stopped a motorcyclist and asked him to call the police? It is your belief that deceased was killed by the person or persons who stole the car?"

"I don't quite like 'belief,' Superintendent. I think I said 'guess.' What about making it 'inference'?"

Presently his car was brought in by the Brighton police, who had found it in a side street. The police handed him his clothes and the note case — which, as he had explained, was concealed on a special little shelf under the dash — but would not allow him to touch the car.

Beyond this, the police made no restrictions. There were no signs that the murder had been planned.

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The theory that a husband is the first suspect when a wife has been murdered was weakened by the theft of the car, which could not have been anticipated.

Curwen took an afternoon train to London.

Curwen assessed his position much as a speculator might assess his own crash on the Stock Exchange. On a different Exchange, Curwen had crashed and now adjudged himself a moral bankrupt — a conception that held a ray of hope. A bankrupt could qualify for discharge and rebuild his credit. He would so live that, at the end of his life, he would have caused more happiness than unhappiness. He assumed, with honest indifference to his own peril, that it would be impossible to convict him. As soon as he reached London, he took the underground to Gormer's Green.

He told Mrs. Morprill that his wife had been murdered, giving her the version he had given the police. He spoke in tragic terms, without hypocrisy, because he saw the death of Morprill and the death of Marion as a single tragedy.

"There is a certain sameness in the way you and I have been treated by life," he said. "In a little while I hope you will feel as I do — that is, I hope we shall be seeing each other more frequently."

The mild eyes looked troubled, as if they understood too much.

"I don't really know what to say to that, Mr. Curwen." For the first time since he had known her, she was groping for words. "I think — I'm sure — I ought to confess that I haven't been quite straightforward with you. About my husband, I mean."

He was badly startled.

"I simply can't imagine your being anything but straightforward."

"It was your kindness and all the things you've done for Maggie that sort of tied my hands. First, it was your never saying anything about Henry when I tried to coax you. Then, the last time you were here, I spoke about him being a tall man, and before you left, I spoke about him being a short man. And you won't mind my saying it now, Mr. Curwen, but I don't believe you know which he was. I don't believe you ever knew him."

"Then you'll have to think up some reason why I should seek you out and tell you lies about my having a moral obligation to him."

"Well, it couldn't have been anything Henry did for you, could it? And I never thought you were telling lies, Mr. Curwen." She paused, then forced herself to continue: "When Maggie was thanking you for the bicycle, I watched you looking at her. And then I sort of caught you looking at me in the same way. It's because we stand for the same thing to you."

"And you know why?"

When she answered she avoided his eye.

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"I only want to say that I shall always think of you as a *good* man, Mr. Curwen. It's little enough to say, but I do hope it will be a help to you. And, please, we don't want you to give us any more things. I promise that if I'm ever unable to look after Maggie, I'll ask your help, for Henry's sake. And — we'd better not see each other after this."

In the underground, he tried to reshape the theory of working for a discharge from moral bankruptcy. What could one do if one's mild-eyed creditors refused repayment? He was still seeking the answer when he reached his flat, to find the local superintendent waiting outside.

"On the back seat of your car," said the superintendent, when they were inside the flat, "was a lady's swimming cap, wet on the inside, and a towel, part of which was damp. Analysis shows sea water in both cases. Do you agree that this points to deceased having entered the car before she was attacked?"

Curwen nodded.

From a brief-case the superintendent produced two envelopes. The first contained a cracked purse mirror, which he replaced as being unidentifiable. The second envelope contained a tortoiseshell comb, with sheath.

"Did you buy this comb at Hoffmeister's? And did you give it to your wife?"

"Yes, to both questions."

"That comb was found close to the bench at the cliffhead, approximately 120 yards from the spot where you told us you found the body. Don't say anything, please, until I've finished. We think that your wife went to the car, removed her swimming cap, toweled herself a little, then took that comb and mirror back to the bench, with no one molesting her. While she was on the bench waiting for you, the car was stolen — which she didn't know, unless you told her before you killed her."

"Good enough, Superintendent!" Curwen spoke absently. He was thinking, "I can beat that widow and child by making a will in their favor. If I don't die morally solvent, I shall at least have paid something."

Before they started, the superintendent accepted a drink. On the way to the police station the two men became quite friendly.

"Speaking off the record," said the superintendent, "your plan was okay, but you're not the right type. The man who stands the best chance on a job like this is the fussy sort, with an eye for small details that might cause trouble. You know? The chap who thumps the doors of a car to make sure they're properly shut. The chap who turns back to make sure he's switched the stove off — which he always has. Checks and doublechecks everything.

"Take your case, f'rinstance. We could never have charged you if you'd thought of going back to that bench to check — to *make sure* she hadn't dropped something that might give you away. See what I mean? Little things like that!"

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

"The Quality of Mercy" is an unusual human interest story which reveals the author's deep understanding of the real stuff of story-telling — the people. Eleazar Lipsky, formerly an Assistant D.A. in New York City and now a practising lawyer, wrote the original story for that successful motion picture, "The Kiss of Death," and then hit the jackpot with his best detective novel to date, THE PEOPLE AGAINST O'HARA *(the movie version of which starred Spencer Tracy). But note the title: one big thing runs through Mr. Lipsky's stories — the people . . .*

FLASH: Before going to press, we learned that Eleazar Lipsky has again hit the jackpot. His new novel, LINCOLN MCKEEVER, *to be published by Appleton-Century-Crofts this coming November, has just been selected by the Literary Guild. Congratulations!*

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

by ELEAZAR LIPSKY

MAMASITA! MAMASITA!" . . . She was a good baby and she never cried, but the night was muggy and she had wet herself. She lay in the crib and waited, then called softly again.

"Mamasita!"

No one came.

She lay flat on the mattress with her tiny hands opening and closing. There was comfort in the motion and her eyes were attracted to their wiggling. She studied her fingers. She was not frightened. The room was empty but the street lamp threw a pattern of light on the ceiling. Her solemn eyes turned up, then got tired. As her face fell sidewards, she looked through the slats toward the kitchen door.

A bed with a patchwork design caught her gaze. On occasions the bed meant to her a musky blend of smells and her mother's warmth. The room was heavy with the familiar smell and she put a finger in her mouth.

"Mamasita?"

She got up and clung to the rail and craned her head. A yellow glow came from the kitchen. Voices sometimes came from the kitchen and at such times her mother would answer to the call. Then there would be quick, tapping footsteps, an opening door, and a quiet soothing voice.

There was a rushing in the water pipes, but still no one came.

"Mamasita?"

A mouse darted along the wall and into the kitchen with a whispery

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scratch of sound. The baby followed the fleeting shadow with saucered eyes and then went back to calling.

"Mama!" she cried angrily.

It was taking too long. She needed to be dried and changed and put back to sleep with a firm rubbing hand on her back. She was suddenly unhappy.

"I want *mamasita!*" She screamed and rattled the crib with fury. "I want *mama!*"

In the warm dank night, all windows were open on the airshaft, and the crying baby roused the building. In the room above, an irascible middle-aged woman with a milk-white face, Anna Farley, thrashed about as the baby's yelling kept on. She covered her head with a pillow, but it was no use. She ached with arthritis and the effort brought her up swearing.

Anna threw back the sheet and ran a hand through her hair. "Ah, my God, my God!" She shook her fist in invocation. "It's that baby again!"

Chris Farley, a red-faced subway guard, raised himself. He had a nodding friendship with the new family below, the Faustos, and he wanted no part of the trouble Anna was bent on starting. "Let it alone," he grumbled. "The baby's got to live too."

"You stand for anything!" With an air of scorn, Anna went to the airshaft and pushed aside an oilcloth curtain. "What's wrong with that baby down there? What's the matter with you people? My husband's got to have his sleep! D'you hear?"

"Count me out of it, Annie," Chris called, annoyed. "Do your own dirty work! I've had about enough."

The baby was quiet for a while and then broke out again with long yelling gasps, her body swelling with rage.

"What the hell down there?" a man called hoarsely.

Other voices joined in, taking both sides of the issue. In the bedlam, some berated the baby, others called for quiet all around. It was not yet midnight, but it was a working-class dwelling in a poor neighborhood. The main outcry came from those who needed sleep. A waitress with an ailing daughter was shrill with complaint.

The clamor did not help, and toward midnight Anna Farley could stand it no longer. "I swear I'll kill them," she groaned. She wrapped herself in a nightrobe and went down to the floor below, wincing as the arthritis throbbed in her shoulder. She paused at the flimsy door to the Fausto apartment.

"What kind are you in there?" she shouted. "Give that baby some milk, or something! What's the matter? Don't you care?"

The baby heard the shouting and suddenly became silent. There was no other response.

"Is anything wrong?" Anna paused irresolute, rubbing her shoulder, then went down into the street with her mind made up. She was too irascible to care about her appearance, or, more likely, it made no difference in the neighborhood. A knot of hoarse-voiced loafers at the door let her pass.

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It was a dark street running to decayed brownstone dwellings. The gutters were littered and an open trench showed construction work for a water main. Anna looked around. Except for the loitering youths no one was about. A candy store was still open at the corner.

Anna walked painfully to Columbus Avenue. Neon lights, green and red, showed some life in the taverns. In the dim bars she could see dull-faced men and women drinking. She stood swearing softly to herself and then a green and white car passed.

Anna waved. "Hey, police!"

The patrol car swept around and drew up at the curb. A young police officer put out his head and said pleasantly, "Are you all right, lady?"

"And what's wrong with me?" she demanded.

The blond man in uniform looked at her robe. "Now is that a way to run around the streets?"

Anna sniffed with annoyance. "Never mind me. There's a baby making a racket." She tossed her head in the direction of the building and explained. "You'd better come. Nobody answers the door. They might be dead in there."

"Or covering the gin mills," the officer said drily.

"There's no telling with these new people," she agreed. "Now I've done my share. It's up to you, the rest of it."

Patrolman Kenneth Holden exchanged a tired glance with an older man at the wheel.

"What do you say, Herman?"

Patrolman Herman Brewer rubbed a bristly jowl. "I guess we got to check," he sighed.

"Hop in." Holden opened the door and Anna squeezed in with a gasping for breath. They drove into the side street.

Anna said finally, "Here's the building."

Holden opened the door. "I won't need you, Herman. You stay with the calls."

"Don't get tangled, Ken. We're almost through." Brewer settled down.

Holden followed Anna past the sullen toughs at the entrance and up to the second landing. His nose was blind to the smells of cookery, nor did he find the poor lighting exceptional. All this was like his own neighborhood. Three women in threadbare wrappers with white naked ankles showing were now at the Faustos' door, chatting indignantly in loud voices. One said ironically, "Ah, the police, the police, they take their time. It's an easy life."

"What's it about?" Holden said easily.

A young woman in braids pointed. "In there, officer."

Holden knocked.

"Sure, he knocks!" a worn older woman said with sarcasm. "We thought of that one too."

Inside, at the sound of knocking, the baby gripped the side of the crib and hushed. She faced toward the sound of strange voices, heavier and slower than those she knew.

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Holden tried knocking again, then asked, "Where's the janitor?"

"He won't like to wake up," the older woman said.

"He'll wake up," Holden promised and found his way down to a cellar apartment. A stocky man, James Mahan, was routed from the bosom of his family, a wet-nosed bunch, and was prodded into action. Mahan was sullen as he hiked into trousers while his wife kept up a firecracker line of advice, but he kept respectful enough and followed Holden back upstairs.

"There you are." Mahan opened the door with a squeak. "Good thing you didn't break in. The assemblyman wouldn't like rough stuff. He owns this building."

Holden saw a neat small kitchen. Plaster and paint were needed, but everything else — food, dishes, scrubbing tub, and brooms — were in order. Tiny baby garments, all pink, were drying over the sink where a faucet dripped.

Inside, the baby began to dance in her crib like a monkey on a stick.

"Where's the kid?" Holden's large frame filled the kitchen.

"Give her two seconds and you'll hear." Anna Farley jerked a thumb toward the bedroom. "That's a neglected baby, officer. It's a real crime sure. And you'd better do something."

"Take it easy," Holden said.

The women crowded at the door while Holden entered a combined living and bedroom, sparsely furnished. An oilcloth-covered table held a milk bottle on a centerpiece of daisies. A double bed was neatly made up with khaki army blankets. He noticed religious pictures and family photographs on the walls, especially an expensive portrait of a plump infant girl with curly black hair and shoe-button eyes. There was, of course, a small television set.

"Mama?"

The sound was like a kitten's mew. The baby gripped the crib with fat little fingers. She looked up at strange faces and her eyes went awash with tears. "Mama?"

Holden squatted and tilted back his hat. "Hello, honey," he said softly. "What's the trouble? You can tell me."

The smell of her wetness was strong.

"She don't talk yet at all!" Anna Farley said with scorn, rubbing her shoulder. "The thing's damn young."

The little fat lip trembled. "I want mama!" When the strange big man tried to lift her, she clung to the crib and squalled. He touched her forehead, turned, and spoke sharply. "This kid's got temperature."

"Sure! A neglected baby!" Anna Farley folded her arms, her white face pointed with satisfaction. "I could've told you. These people!"

The baby wailed as Holden returned to the women in the kitchen where he asked, annoyed, "When are these people supposed to get home?"

The janitor, James Mahan, said stolidly, "They're a new kind around here, officer. Who knows if they'll come back at all?"

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Holden wiped his hat band methodically. "What's the tale here?"

The women's view was that if the Faustos were out drinking, there was no telling when they would return. A street accident was ruled unlikely. There was no useful opinion and Holden found himself sweating in the muggy flat.

"Would anybody mind this kid?" he asked.

"Don't look at me!" Anna winced as her arthritis stabbed her. "That temperature might be the measles, or the dip'theria, or something else filthy. I got my own to consider first. I wouldn't take in that dirty kid for anything."

"Who knows what that kid's got?" the girl with the braids agreed.

"She's not sick." Holden paused at the sound of fresh wailing. "It's just too much crying. That can give temperature."

"Now he's a doctor!" the sarcastic older woman said. "Ah, that badge, that badge, it means a lot."

"It's common sense," Holden argued. "I got two of my own."

The women were unmoved by his parenthood and his plea brought no volunteer.

"Ah, forget it!" Holden went down to the patrol car where his partner, Herman Brewer, thrice a father, received the news with disgust.

"Still, we got to do something." Brewer rubbed his jowls, vexed. "Temperature can be a tricky thing in babies. You should've rung in one of them biddies."

"It was too sweating hot to argue." Holden paused. "They don't like the idea. These new people ain't their kind."

"That's natural. The trouble is, it's 12, time to knock off. My old lady is waiting up for me." Brewer paused while a series of call signals filled the car. "We can't stick around till morning waiting for that kid's pa and ma. If the parents don't care, why should we?"

"What about an ambulance?"

"Let's forget about that. It would take too long."

They decided on quicker action. After a call to a detective on duty at the precinct station house, Holden went back to gather a change of clothing and to express his vigorous opinion of the neighbors. They then drove downtown to the New York Home of Mercy in the Sixties, where the receiving room was open.

Wrapped in her blanket, the baby's body heat swelled to lap her in comfort. Her wailing dropped to a whimper under the firm grip of a man's hand. There was the rocking motion of the car and the passing lights, then short lifting jolts which meant stairs. The air changed and brightness told her of a big room. She felt the rumble of a man's chest tones, then another voice, a woman's. Perhaps dimly she understood that they were talking of her, since her name, Carmen, was spoken several times. She felt hot and drowsy and her eyes were swimming.

A woman's kind face, framed in a white coif, bent over and there was a

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clean smell of soap. Then, suddenly, Carmen Fausto was asleep . . .

While the baby slept, the street grew deserted and quiet. A small couple, hardly more than a boy and a girl, turned in from a main street which still had traffic. They walked along, swinging hands with a dreamy expression. They laughed with an occasional gentle word to each other, thinking back to their evening's pleasure.

The girl wore a flowered cotton frock. Her face was heart-shaped and delicate, and her hair fell in black curls. The boy, or he might have been a man, was no taller or heavier. His smiling face was thin and irregular and beardless. He wore a sporty jacket.

They entered the building and went up one flight. The hall was dim. No one was about and the man, Vincente Fausto, gave his wife, Juana, a kiss just before they opened the door to their flat, and she giggled.

Thus there was no warning as they entered through the kitchen. At first, Juana noticed nothing as she turned on the light and loosened her hair, nor did she see the note under the milk bottle on the table. She went smiling to the crib with a sense that things were too quiet. She looked down and began to shake. "My baby!" she gasped. "My baby!"

Fausto had remained in the kitchen. He was at the ice box with its cheesey smell. "What about the baby?" he called.

Juana screamed.

"My baby! She's not here!"

"What kind of a joke?" He turned over a chair in his haste. A look was enough. "Oh, my God!"

Juana stood shaking, ashen and sallow, too terrified for speech.

Fausto rummaged behind a hanging drape and under the bed. It was no joke. He stood in the center of the room and clutched his hands.

"Don't be scared, *querida!*" He spoke bravely, but his heart seemed squeezed by an icy hand. "She's some place! Maybe a neighbor! Just don't get scared!"

She gave him a dreadful look. "You wouldn't come home when I asked!"

He had no answer.

"They stole my baby!" she shrieked. "*Ai! Ai!* I want my baby back!"

"Take it easy, *querida.*" He bit his finger and it bled, but he did not taste the saltiness. "What do I do?" he muttered. "Where do I start?" He looked to his young wife for guidance, but none came. Her eyes were glaring white. "You wait here!"

He rushed out and began banging doors on his floor. The annoyed neighbors either knew nothing or pretended not to know. It took a stretch of agony and three tries before an elderly man, a widower, suggested he ask the Farleys.

Anna Farley came to the door rubbing her shoulder. "What do you want?" she asked stolidly.

"The baby!" he begged. "She's gone! You know anything about the baby?"

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She scornfully placed her arms akimbo. "Ah, so you're the fine one leaves a sick baby crying alone! What kind of a man are you?"

"Please!" he entreated.

"Sure I know something! Now why should I tell the likes of you?"

"You know something?" He was small with a boy's face, not as heavy or large as the woman before him. "You know about the baby?" he repeated stupidly.

"What if I do?"

A look flared in his eyes like a spurting match. He took out a knife and pressed a button and the blade flung itself into position. He raised the cutting edge to touch her heart.

"Where's the baby?"

His voice trembled.

Anna Farley saw the wildness in his eyes and she knew she was close to death. It was something she had faced with each birth, always with calm, but in the dim hall with the sharp steel pricking her skin, it was sickish to her taste. She knew she must speak with care.

"It was the police who came, Mister. The baby was crying and somebody called them. They took her."

"You called them?" he demanded.

"It was not me, Mister, I swear it. I didn't even know till after they came."

"It was you that called them!" he muttered thickly.

She saw that he knew the truth, but she had to keep denying it. She remained utterly still, facing the staring little man. "Please don't hurt me, Mister," she begged. "I've got three kids of my own back in there. I had nothing to do with it."

Her robe had fallen open, partly exposing her heavy breasts, but neither was aware of that.

He asked in a low voice, "Where is the baby now?"

"They took her downtown. The Home of Mercy, they said. They left a note. It's a fine place. She'll be all right."

From within, her husband called, "What the hell is it out there, Annie?"

She kept her eyes on the man with the knife. "It's nothing, Chris. Go back to sleep."

Fausto took a deep breath and stepped back.

"Please excuse me, lady." He put away the knife. "I'm sorry about this. You know how it is."

"Get away!" she cried hoarsely. "Go away!" She slammed the door and put her back against it. "Get him away, for the love of God!" she said, over and over. "Oh, God, get him away!"

Fausto turned and ran down into the street. He passed his own flat, forgetting to tell his wife what he had learned. When finally she found the note under the milk bottle, he had already gone.

An hour later, Vincente Fausto was at the entrance to the New York Home of Mercy. His breath was coming in sobs. He stood with his forehead pressed against the door, his

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thumb held rigidly on the button.

Somewhere within the massive pile the bell was ringing.

The old red brick building looked like a hospital, which indeed it once had been. It stood on a square block behind an iron picket fence, sheltered from the street by an old shade tree. It was dark except at the point where Fausto stood.

A patrolman noticed the bowed small figure at the entrance, but passed on, swinging his nightstick.

There was finally a tap at the plate glass.

Fausto looked up. Silhouetted against the inside light, the shadow of a coif loomed above him and he made out a woman's face. He shook with the effort to keep himself in tight control.

"What is it?" the nun asked sharply, her voice muted by the glass. Her voice was cross, something Fausto had not expected. He caught his hand to his side.

"My little girl," he gasped. "I'm here to take her home. I'm the father."

Sister Ursula had had a vexing day. There had been a suspicion of whooping cough among the seven-year-olds and her food accounts refused to balance. Her answer was short.

"You know the rules. We're closed now. Come back tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow, now!" he insisted. "There's some mistake. The cops brought the kid here when they had no right. I want her back now. It was just a mix-up."

"A police case?"

Her voice had changed. There was a sharp ring in her tones. She looked behind her. Except for a workman scrubbing the stairs, the tiled foyer was empty. The man outside the door looked harmless and she threw the bolt. This was against the rule that no one should be admitted after 10 o'clock.

"Come in."

Fausto entered with a quick step and glanced nervously about. There was a smell of disinfectant from the stairs ahead. A sign indicated the nursery up one flight. He nodded with his chin.

"Is the baby up there?"

"Step into the office," the nun said curtly. "I must talk with you."

Fausto heard the voice of authority. Sister Ursula had the practical air of a graduate nurse, used to dealing with the slow and ignorant. She was tall and heavy, he saw, with a look of strong common-sense. Perhaps she was 50, but this was hard to know since her round stout face showed no lines. Nor could her hair under the coif tell her age. He held back.

"Talk? I don't want talk!" he said in a loud voice. "Just tell me where she is. The mama is waiting. I don't see what this is all about."

The workman on the stairs put down his scrubbing brush and called.

"Any trouble, Sister?"

"It's nothing, Anton," she replied, then said firmly, "Come in here, young man."

Something inside Fausto began to quake, but he followed into the office

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where he took a seat at her desk. He sat twisting his hands. This severe room with its filing cabinets smacked of officialdom and he knew he had to behave.

"Now then."

Sister Ursula affixed her spectacles, large horn-rimmed affairs, and put aside her fiscal accounts with regret. The figures were tormenting but absorbing after the day's work. She turned to the admittance book for the day and studied a dozen entries, in and out. When she finally spoke, it was with a ringing accent that Fausto found strange.

"The child's name?"

"Carmen Fausto."

"Your name and your wife's?"

"I'm Vincente Fausto. My wife is Juana. We live in Rattigan Place."

She ran a finger down a page, then looked up. "We have a child by that name. She came in filthy. She's asleep upstairs."

His breath escaped.

"Then she's here," he said stupidly. "She's all right?"

"We won't know until she's examined."

"Can I take her home now?"

She placed the book aside and closed her tired eyes to consider. This was always disagreeable, this sort of case, and she longed to get back to her accounts; but she had a duty. She had no patience for these fools. She could look back over the years to thousands of children, sick, wounded, burned in flaming tenements, all who came to the Home. She was always moved to anger, but instead of answering, she dialed the telephone and spoke briefly.

"Mr. Cavanaugh, please come over now."

Fausto asked suspiciously, "Who was that?"

She slipped back her cuffs. "What happened tonight? Why did you leave the child?"

Fausto did not know what to say. He felt panic growing within him. The baby, his baby, was in the building and they meant to keep her. He wanted to rush out to get her but he was afraid and guilty before the nun. Her severity loomed large in his eyes. He felt a sense of awe. The bold words he wanted to say came out defiant but trembling.

"If I answer questions, can I get the kid now? I got to know. The wife — if I don't come home with the baby, she'll go out of her mind."

She ignored the question. "What do you do?"

"I'm a shipping clerk. I work. I could get reference." He came back to his point. "Who was that Cavanaugh?"

"Never you mind."

"I got a right to know. I'm the father."

"Ah, indeed!" She studied him almost with irony. "The father! Well, Mr. Cavanaugh is a city detective. He's in charge of this baby's case. You'll have to talk to him in a moment."

The child had to be held till morning to be examined for disease or neglect. The detective might wish to

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return the baby, or the parents might face a criminal charge.

Fausto asked, unbelieving, "The cops can keep a man's kid from him?"

"They can. It depends on the facts."

"Some cop takes away my own kid? I'm supposed to tell that to the wife?"

"The detective is in charge."

He smashed the desk with his fist and the sound was like a pistol crack.

"Be quiet!" she ordered angrily. "A fine one, you are! The baby came in filthy and hot! It might have burned to death while you were out drinking, man!"

He shouted. "Maybe they try to take the kid for good, hey? Nobody does that! I'm getting that baby!"

"Now, see here —"

Fausto threw back his chair. He paused a moment as she arose with him, an imposing figure in her black habit, and twice his size.

"I'm getting that baby!" he shouted.

She grasped his sleeve as he tried to rush past.

"Behave yourself, young man —"

He screamed hoarsely and he turned and his hand darted out. She saw the steel clearly — frozen, it seemed, in midflight — the flecks of rust, the serrations on the blade.

She could not believe it.

It felt as though a fiery tooth went through her side.

In all her life, not even as a girl before her novitiate, had she ever been struck in anger. No hand had ever been raised against her. Her habit had walled her off even from the sense of such things.

Fausto stared at her in terror.

She felt sick. This boy with wild eyes had walked in from the streets and had struck at her life.

"I didn't —" he cried.

The first shock of pain died like an echo, then surged back. She felt her side and looked down at a smear of blood.

"The baby!" he explained hoarsely. "It was on account of the kid —"

He dropped the knife and rushed off into the foyer.

"Anton!" she called. "Anton!"

There was no fright in her, only a sense of disbelief. She heard sounds of a struggle in the foyer. There was shouting and a banging, like a pail falling downstairs. Her office with its neat filing cabinets was suddenly strange.

She felt weak.

How bad was it? she wondered.

She started to grope for her crucifix when she fell into blackness . . .

Some hours later, Fausto found himself at the police station, weeping and abject, facing a man with hard eyes, blue and cold, who put questions. The yellow-haired man in authority, he understood, was an assistant district attorney named Wiley. The room was crowded with heavy-faced detectives, all with angry loud voices. He rubbed a bruised shinbone where he had been kicked. Wiley put a question.

"Do you want to tell your story?"

"I don't know what made me do it!" Fausto wept.

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"Would you like to smoke?"

"I'm too nervous."

"All right." Wiley sat back, balancing a cigarette, while a man beside him tapped a few notes on a stenotype machine. "Let's start at the beginning."

Fausto wretchedly was taken over the facts, large and small, from the time he had come home with Juana. The questions were skilled and methodical. It surprised him to see how much this man with the hard blue eyes knew or guessed about the events of the night.

"Isn't it a fact that you meant to cut down anyone who got in your way?" Wiley charged. "Wasn't that your intent when you reached the Home of Mercy?"

"I just knew I wanted the baby," Fausto said listlessly.

Wiley pointed a finger.

"You were carrying a switchblade knife, you knew that!"

"I use it at my work. I got to cut a lot of cord making bundles." Fausto dashed the blurring tears away. "I should've killed myself before using it! Why would I want to do a thing like that? I couldn't help myself."

He looked around at the disdainful heavy faces. He felt disliked and unclean and despised. "Can't nobody believe that?" he cried.

"Stabbing a nun!" a sharp-faced man with a brogue burst out. "I ought to cut your hands off, you son of a —"

"I didn't mean it!" Fausto protested weakly.

"They never mean it!" the man with the brogue cried. "Stabbing a nun!"

The lawyer broke in to protect the record. "What made you leave the baby alone last night?"

"Such a good baby!" Fausto could not stop his tears. "She never cried before. She sleeps a lot. I got this job just a short time. I'm working for this concern that makes coat fronts — you know, for men's suits. It's not bad pay, but with one thing and another, I'm paying back some money I owe. There's some loan sharks working that part of town and they take me plenty."

"What's the point?"

Fausto paused. "I'm awful short. I got no money for baby sitters. Then we moved into this strange house. These people — they don't like our kind and they don't talk to us. But I can't keep the wife cooped up. She's a young girl, sir, she's got to get out sometime. Sure, I can sit home when she goes to the movie, but that's no fun for her. So we take a chance. The baby is always so good."

"Go on."

"That's all. Once every other week I take the wife out for *pizza* dinner at this place downtown. It's cheap and good and they serve this wine. Maybe we took too much because for once I was flush. I played policy and I drew the number yesterday and we were celebrating. Our mistake was we took in a movie. The wife wanted to go home, but I said it would be all right, and I talked her into it. This night

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the baby cried. That's the whole story."

"Is there anything else you want to say?"

Fausto put a begging question. "Was that so wrong, sir? Lots of people do it. It was just a little extra time we took. Can they take away a man's baby for that?"

The assistant district attorney finished a cigarette without reply. He exchanged glances with the angry-faced detectives and swung about in the swivel chair. They had no suggestions and he concluded abruptly.

"No further questions. Examination closed 5 A.M."

It was over.

Fausto waited, but nothing happened, and he asked, "How is the nun, sir? I'm worried about that."

Wiley put on his hat to leave. He stood for a moment, a tall lean man with hard lines about his face, towering above the wretched little prisoner. He spoke slowly.

"You're a lucky man you missed, Fausto. She's going to live."

Perhaps three months later, on a brisk day in October, Sister Ursula entered the great Criminal Courts Building with a troubled look on her face. She asked directions at the circular desk in the lobby and took an elevator to the eleventh floor where a uniformed officer found her a seat in a crowded courtroom.

She whispered to the officer, "Has a man named Fausto been sentenced yet?"

"I'll see." The officer went forward, and returned. "Not yet."

She folded her hands and settled down in the rear while a long sentence calendar was disposed of by a stern judge whose glacial eyes were devoid of compassion. The cases went fast. Prisoners mutely accepted the sentences of the Court without any great show of emotion, and then when the courtroom was somewhat empty, a clerk announced, "Call Vincente Fausto for sentence."

There was a small stir of interest. In the rear, the door opened and the small dejected man walked quietly to his place and humbly bowed his head while four court officers gathered about him. Sister Ursula was conscious that her heart was beginning to distress her with its powerful hastening beat.

The court crier, a man with silvered hair, demanded, "Vincente Fausto, have you anything to say why judgment of this court should not now be imposed on you?"

A sensible-looking woman, a lawyer employed by the Legal Aid Society, arose from the counsel table and stated in a low musical voice, "The defendant is ready for sentence."

The judge removed his chin from his palm and asked disagreeably, "Do you wish to say anything in his behalf, Miss Collier?"

The lawyer bent down and whispered to the prisoner who shook his head. She looked up and said, "He wants to throw himself on the mercy of the court. He says he's sorry."

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"I know that," the judge stated in an implacable voice. "For that reason, Miss Collier, I'm going to show him as much mercy as my conscience permits. Is that all?"

"That is all," the lawyer responded.

Sister Ursula half arose, then sank back as the court officer placed a finger to his lips for silence. The judge proceeded to impose sentence. After reciting the facts, he stated in a grating voice:

"It is the judgment of this Court that you be sentenced to a State's Prison for a term of not less than three and not more than five years."

"Three years?" Fausto said stupidly, then bowed his head, "Yes, Your Honor, thank you!" There was a hoarse sound behind him and Juana Fausto stood in the aisle and began to scream, her hands shaking, her voice cracking, as all her strength went into the gasping cries.

"*Ai! Ai! Ai!*"

Fausto clasped his hands and turned to her miserably, "Oh, please, *querida*, it's not so bad! Please!"

"Remove that woman," the judge ordered.

"*Ai!*" she screamed.

The girl twisted and squirmed and her hair fell in disorder as she resisted the court officers who tried to drag her from the courtroom. They were gentle and considerate, but it was a hard business and they were panting as the door closed behind them.

It suddenly seemed to the assistant district attorney, standing at the prosecution table, that this case, which he had concluded as a job well done, a credit in its small way to his office and to himself, had been a piece of cruel folly.

When the chamber was again in order, Fausto was taken aside to answer pedigree questions put by the clerk. In this interval, Sister Ursula came forward and introduced herself and asked for permission to address the court.

"Yes, Sister, what is it?" the judge asked courteously.

She placed her hands together and asked strongly, "Why wasn't I called as a witness?"

"A witness?" The puzzled judge turned to the assistant district attorney. "This man pleaded guilty. There was no need for a witness."

Wiley explained, "Sister Ursula feels concerned with the sentence."

"I see," the judge answered.

The nun measured the judge with her level stare. "Three years in prison, Your Honor! That's a great deal of time to separate a man from his family."

The chamber was suddenly quiet. As Fausto turned, he recognized the nun. The other events of that night were confused in his mind, but the strong face of the nun was not something he would ever forget.

Judge Matthew Brady's face was granite. He drummed quietly at the bench, staring at the court officers, measuring the sound of his harsh voice. "I think, Sister Ursula," he said gently, "that I understand these problems better than you possibly can. I

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suggest you let me fix the sentence."

"I understand this man's heart," the nun replied.

"Perhaps so," the judge answered. "But he might have killed you. Under the circumstances, he is fortunate in the sentence imposed."

"This man pleaded guilty to obtain the mercy of the Court!" The nun's voice was strained. "This man was not acting with reason, but with his heart. He wanted his baby. There was no criminal intent within him. It would be cruel to punish him further."

"I'm sorry —" the judge began.

"At the very moment it happened, I forgave him," she went on strongly. "Why should the Court be less compassionate? A man with so much love in him should not be in prison."

Wiley caught the direction of the judge's glance, and looked to the press table where the reporters were wearing delighted grins. He could visualize the newspaper stories the following morning, and, he reflected with grim amusement, the judge was not less discerning.

"Ah, yes!" Judge Brady finally agreed. "As you say."

His face was scarlet, but with judicial aplomb the judge called the prisoner back and suspended the sentence on condition of good behavior. He pointed a strong moral and threw a strong tongue-lashing at the prisoner into the bargain.

"Oh, thank you, Judge!" Fausto cried. "God bless you!"

"And now, get out of my Court!" the judge exclaimed, and swept from the bench into his private chambers, where he went for a nerve-soothing cigar.

In the corridor there was a firecracker babble of delight as Juana understood that Vincente was going home with her to the child, and only after a time did the excited couple leave the corridor.

Wiley led Sister Ursula to the elevator. The morning sun was pouring into the marble corridor, and the day looked bright and clear outside.

"What could that judge have been thinking of?" Sister Ursula murmured.

"I have no idea what judges think about," Wiley said drily.

She looked at him sharply. "It was inexcusable to wait so long to call me, Mr. Wiley. I was almost too late. You were quite negligent."

"I'm afraid," Wiley confessed, "that I never expected this judge to agree to your request. He has strong ideas of his own."

There was a constrained silence before she spoke again.

"Thank you for being kind to me. I needed it less than that poor man. The mercy of the Court, indeed!"

She stepped into the elevator and left.

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THE BLACKMAILER

by MICHAEL GILBERT

I HAVE KNOWN MISS PRINCE FOR a good many years, and I have liked her as long as I have known her. I have also respected her and, occasionally, feared her; but I have never pretended to understand her.

The first thing about her was her early Victorian sense of justice. She seemed to possess, in the fullest degree, those clear, hard, unsentimental, unshifting ideas of the difference between right and wrong that belonged to the first years of the Young Queen.

Then she was a practical philanthropist. She chose her objects wisely and gave generously. She imposed only one condition on her gifts. If her name was so much as whispered in connection with them, she never gave to that cause again.

There was one other thing; I happened to know roughly what her income was. Most of it came from investments, and she was still enjoying some patent rights from her father's inventions. She lived in modest comfort in North London and she kept a maid. But on occasions her gifts seemed to exceed her means.

In the summer of last year, in particular, her donations reached a high point of generosity. It was entirely by accident that I discovered the source of this money. Packer — she's the maid I mentioned — is a good-hearted, garrulous creature and some of the details came from her. The other facts were there, for everybody to read, in the newspapers. . . .

One fine May morning Miss Titmus, who rented the top floor of a quiet house in a quiet crescent in North London, folded a blanket on the linoleum of the kitchen floor, sat down on it, laid her gray head back onto the pillow she had placed inside the gas oven, and turned on the tap. Her landlady, who lived in the basement, smelled the gas and hobbled up to see what it was about. She was too late by half an hour. . . .

Spring turned to summer and summer faded into the white mists of autumn and on one of those dark November days, when the second installment of the taxes is overdue and the Christmas bonus is still in the distant and problematical future, Mr. Medlicott, who had a house not far from the North Circular Road, swallowed a glass of salts-of-lemon and died before the morning, in great agony, but stiff-lipped to the end.

Inquiry revealed that Mr. Medlicott was overdrawn at the bank and had been worried by debts. . . .

The next case, which came along with the first daffodils in the spring of the new year, was of a somewhat different type.

Miss Merrant was a small woman of

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about 60. At about 6 in the evening, when light was fading, she climbed the protective barrier and walked out onto the parapet of one of London's roadway viaducts. It was a straight drop of nearly 100 feet to the concrete below. But she was evidently a woman who believed in taking no chances and therefore she waited until she saw a heavy truck, towing a heavy trailer, come swinging down the hill. She judged her moment had arrived and stepped off into space.

The driver caught a glimpse of her body flailing through the air and stamped on the brake, pulling his monster to a screaming standstill. He climbed out, white-faced. For a moment he thought his imagination had been playing tricks with him, and then he heard a moan from somewhere above his head. Looking up, he saw Miss Merrant, voiceless, winded, but otherwise intact, in the sagging canopy of his truck.

In due course the court missioner made a report. It concluded: "Miss Merrant, though not rich or even particularly well off, was financially quite solvent until the end of last year. She had an income from some investments left to her by her father, and a small 'nest egg' in the Post Office Savings Bank. In the last three months she appears to have sold these securities and drawn out the money in her savings account and spent it. She is very reticent about this and I cannot understand exactly where this money, amounting to £800 or £900, has gone. Miss Merrant herself either cannot or will not help me."

"There is a man to see you, Miss Prince."

Miss Prince folded her fat, white, cornelian-ringed hands in pleasant anticipation. "A man. Well, now. Isn't that nice. Should I, perhaps, be asking him to tea, Packer?"

"I rather fancy not, Miss Prince. He's not really — not quite ——"

"I see. I wonder what he can be coming to see me about. Are we ready to receive him?"

Packer made a few deft arrangements while Miss Prince looked on approvingly.

The man who made his appearance a few moments later was on the young side of middle age, a little fat, a little bald, entirely nondescript. After an interval of hesitation, which was just long enough to be thunderingly rude, Miss Prince invited the stranger to be seated.

"Miss Prince?"

"You have the advantage of me, I am afraid."

"My name's Smith. I won't keep you long. Very good of you to see me."

"Not at all," said Miss Prince. "An old woman like me comes to be glad of any company."

"An — oh, yes, I see. Well, now Miss Prince, can I start the ball rolling by asking you a question? Do you know a Mrs. Preston?"

A sudden silence fell in that pleas-

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ant upstairs room. Miss Prince sat motionless. The stranger appeared to be in no hurry to break the silence. There was a little spurt of fire, a cinder fell tinkling from the grate, and with an apparent effort Miss Prince spoke. "Well. What an extraordinary question! Why do you ask it? Who are you?"

"Never mind for a moment who I am. Shall we stick to the question?"

"And if I refuse to answer your question?"

"Well," said the man reasonably, "either you do know Mrs. Preston or you don't. If you do, there's no harm in saying so." There was a plain edge to the voice now. "If you don't, perhaps you will explain how —" a little notebook came into play — "at 11:15 precisely this morning you approached the assistant in the sub-post office on Millpath Road, produced a Post Office Savings book purporting to be made out in Mrs. Preston's name, and withdrew three pounds."

"I — you — I —" said Miss Prince. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

Out of his experience Smith gave her three minutes to get over it, and to cover the interval he went on talking, half to himself.

"Commonest form of crime," he said. "You ought to hear what the judges say. Very harsh about it. Always recommending the law to be tightened up. But it never does any good. So long as it's 'easy come, easy go,' 'Produce your book and we'll pay the money,' there's bound to be fraud. People," said Mr. Smith virtuously, "will always take advantage of any system based on public trust. Ingenious, too, some of them. Get hold of an old savings account book, like you did, and get to work on it. Ingenious," said Mr. Smith. "Very ingenious. But illegal."

"Do you . . ." said Miss Prince. "Are you a policeman?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Smith. "I'm a member of the public. One of the people you've been defrauding. I'm your victim, see." He showed his yellow teeth in a quiet smile.

"How did you . . . ?"

"Lady," said Mr. Smith, "I just watch for it. I stand in post offices and places and watch for it. If that young lady behind the counter hadn't been so busy gossiping to her girl friend she'd have spotted it a mile away. Your face, your voice, your hands. It was written in letters a mile and a half high, really it was."

Miss Prince seemed to have recovered a little of her former composure. She drew herself up in her chair, dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief, and said: "What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, now," said Mr. Smith. The interview seemed, in some way, to have reached a turning point. "You'll excuse me, I'm sure, but I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff." He got up with surprising speed, glanced round the room, looked behind the old leather and brass-nailed screen, peered behind the curtains.

"There," he said. "You'd be surprised what people think of. How-

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ever, now we know we're alone, anything we talk about can be just between the two of us. Now if I did no more than my plain duty you'd be in the dock. But there's worse places than the dock. There's Holloway Prison. Do you know the first thing they do to you at Holloway?"

Miss Prince made a very faint noise of inquiry.

"They cut all your hair off and wash you with yellow soap."

Miss Prince shuddered. "Don't talk like that. Please don't talk like that. It isn't — it's not only me. My family. My father would never have got over it. How lucky that he's dead! He was an inventor, you know."

They were always Army officers or inventors, thought Mr. Smith.

"He invented the first English phonograph," said Miss Prince. "But the big gramophone companies ——"

"Quite," said Mr. Smith. "But the important thing at the moment is that I need some capital. And capital is a thing which is hard to come by. Income, now — I'd laugh at income. What's £5 a week? Two pounds ten in the tax collector's pocket. But a nice round capital sum of £500."

"Five hundred! I couldn't possibly ——"

"It's going to save a lot of trouble if I tell you straight out that I've been devoting a little time lately to having a look at your affairs. I know exactly what you've got in that current account of yours and I know what securities your nice kind bank manager is holding for you. It may mean realizing a little of that war stock."

"I don't think ——"

"The offer's open for two minutes. At the end of that time the price goes up — to £800."

Mr. Smith took out a watch.

Miss Prince's nerve held for exactly ten seconds, then she gave a little moan and said, "You must give me time."

"Three days," said Mr. Smith.

I have no exact information about how Miss Prince spent the intervening three days. For the first 48 hours she does not seem to have done anything very much. Packer tells me that she doesn't think she was sleeping very well just then.

On the morning of the third day she saw her bank manager and drew £500 in pound notes.

And a few hours later she was saying, "Well, Mr. Smith, I'm glad you were able to get here."

"Like hell you are," said Mr. Smith shortly. "Have you got the money?"

"Yes, I've got the money." She took a sealed envelope out of her handbag and passed it over to Mr. Smith. "You'll find it's all there, just as you said. Five hundred pounds. I got it in one pound notes."

"Very kind of you," said Mr. Smith. "I think I'll count it." He was fumbling open the envelope with impatient fingers. "Not that I don't trust you, but mistakes will happen."

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"There is just one thing I'd like to be sure about," said Miss Prince mildly. "How am I to know that once you have this money you won't soon be back asking for more!"

Mr. Smith looked up from his counting. "You'll have to trust me,"

"Like Miss Merrant trusted you?" said Miss Prince softly.

Mr. Smith's fingers faltered, then stopped. There was silence in the room as he searched Miss Prince's face. Then he said, and for the first time there was a note of uncertainty in his voice, "What do you know about Miss Merrant?"

"Why, she is one of my dearest friends," said Miss Prince. "We're all a great big family up here in North London you know. I knew Miss Titmus, too, slightly. We had a nodding acquaintance, in the queues. Mr. Medlicott as well. I didn't know him personally. But I knew of him. He used to work in the same office — before he retired, of course — as my young cousin Alfred. . . ."

"So what," said Mr. Smith shortly. "What's all this leading up to? Why are you telling me all this?"

"It must have been almost exactly three months ago —" Miss Prince over-rode the interruption — "when they let Miss Merrant out of the nursing home. She came to see me and sat in that very chair you are sitting in now and between the two of us —" Miss Prince pounced forward a little in her chair like a fat but well-muscled cat — "we hatched up a little *PLOT!*"

"What ——?" said Mr. Smith. "What ——?"

"The advantage we had," went on Miss Prince, "was that we knew what was wrong in each case. We knew about Miss Titmus and her — well, I suppose there's no object in false modesty now — about her so-called husband and the letters that used to come to her every week. And we knew about Mr. Medlicott and the silly, silly things he did with his Post Office Savings book. I expect it was really that which gave us our idea. And Miss Merrant — she told me everything. It didn't seem a very big thing for her to have paid £900 for, but I suppose that tastes differ. The thing about it all which struck us," Miss Prince rapped one hand delicately on the table — "the common factor in them all was that they were all *Post Office* matters — Miss Titmus's letters and Mr. Medlicott's savings account and Miss Merrant's silly telegrams. So we got the idea — I'm sure you'll tell me if we were wrong — that this person who was doing it all was obviously a person who hung around post offices a good deal to see if he could pick up information."

The shot went home.

"After that it was quite straightforward, but very, very tedious. We paid some money into an account in Packer's name ——"

"That's a lie."

"Her name really is Mrs. Preston. Didn't you know? I call all my personal maids Packer. It's so much easier."

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Mr. Smith found nothing to say to this.

"Then I drew out £3 at a time for her in the most *furtive* manner — I'm really quite an actress, Mr. Smith — from practically every sub-office in North London. It was quite fatiguing."

"How are you going to prove this?"

"Of course, we'd thought of that. I can assure you I took the very best legal advice — without mentioning any names. I was told that I ought to have witnesses to two things. A witness that you asked for the money, and a witness that I paid it to you. Well, I've done just that. I suppose because you looked behind the screen the *first* time you forgot to this time. You can come out now, Packer. The gentleman won't hurt you."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Packer.

"You take your money back," said Mr. Smith. He shoveled it urgently across the table.

"Certainly, if you insist. I don't think that will make any difference to the *legal* position. The great thing, so I'm told, is that you took it in the first place."

"You'll never prove it," said Mr. Smith. "I'm not admitting anything."

"If only," said Miss Prince severely, "you had listened properly to what I said the first time you came. I told you — it was indiscreet of me really, but I do boast sometimes — that my father was an inventor. He was a great hand with phonographs. You remember? He was almost the first man in London to see the possibilities of wax recording. Do sit down, Mr. Smith, and let's listen to our first conversation in comfort. Press that switch down, Packer. That's right."

A startlingly life-like voice rang out. "My name's Smith. I won't keep you long. Very good of you to see me ——"

Smith seemed suddenly to deflate. The stuffing was out of him. He sat down slowly, and his face was yellow. "What are you going to do?"

It was almost an echo. How many people had said those very words *to him?*

"Seven years' penal servitude would seem to be the normal sort of sentence," said Miss Prince. "I don't think they actually shave your head in Dartmoor now. Just a very short crop, I should think."

"What do you want?" said Mr. Smith.

"Eight hundred pounds — just for a start," said Miss Prince. "And it's no good saying that you haven't got it, because what with Miss Titmus and Mr. Medlicott and poor Miss Merrant there must be quite a lot of money there. I've no doubt we'll have some more from time to time."

"Eight hundred pounds is a great deal ——"

"If it was income," said Miss Prince gaily, "I wouldn't say 'thank you' for it. But a nice capital sum. . . ."

For the first time Mr. Smith really looked at Miss Prince, at the prim lips, the shining jet eyes, the firm lines fencing the mouth. He saw nothing to comfort him.

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BURDEN OF GUILT

by JOHN and WARD HAWKINS

PETE SIMMONS, THE POLICE REporter, was asleep in the chief's office when Chief of Police Walter McClary came in. Simmons was gray and mussed, an untidy mountain of a man who completely filled the visitor's chair beside McClary's desk. His feet were propped on the wastebasket, his hands were folded across his middle. For all his size, he slept as quietly as a child and wakened as easily. He opened his eyes at the sound of McClary's heels upon the floor. He yawned and rubbed the gritty stubble on his cheeks.

"I needed a nap," he said. "It was a hard night."

Chief McClary said, "I heard about it."

"After it happened," Pete Simmons said. "If you'd heard about it before, it wouldn't have happened. As a duly accredited member of the press I had a front-row seat. It was quite a show. Cooper used an ax on the door. We were in so fast the money was still on the tables. Cooper impounded all of it. He grabbed the slots, the crap tables, the roulette layout. Then — for a topper — he slammed Pat Ryan in the can."

"I know that," McClary said. Cooper was the local district attorney.

Pete Simmons said, "How about a statement, Chief?"

"No comment," McClary said.

"Here's something you may not know," Simmons said. "Pat's screaming. There was a time when he didn't object to spending a night in the bucket. It was part of the work, Chief. But not any more. And what the kid did to the Red Wheel was very rough indeed."

"Why tell me this?" McClary said.

"I've worked City Hall for 30 years," Simmons said. "I hate to see my friends get hurt. Cooper's sitting up there in the D.A.'s chair. He's your boy — or he was. He's a nice kid but he's full of beans and he's about to pull the roof down — on you, Chief, along with some other guys. Maybe it's time he learned the facts of life, like how he got up there where he is."

McClary said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"So we'll change the subject," Simmons said. "After this thing at the Red Wheel last night, what's going to happen to your deal?"

"What deal?" Chief McClary said.

"Be a clam." Pete Simmons' eyes were blue and bright as ice. "But get braced. Like I told you, the roof is coming down." He left his chair and lumbered across the room. "For your information," he said, "I knew Madge Sorenson very well. I know how come she adopted Hal Cooper when he was a tough young kid. I talked to her the

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day her husband died. He didn't leave a dime."

"Close the door when you go out," McClary said. Simmons closed the door.

McClary turned his chair to face the tall windows behind his desk. He was a stocky, thickset man, red of face and broad of hand. He'd been a cop all of his working life; he'd been chief of police for eighteen years. He looked out across a stretch of lawn to the windowed face of the building across the street.

Once, long back, there'd been a row of tall and friendly elms out there. He missed those trees. He had hated to see them come down to make room for the new business block. But towns grew up. His town had grown when the wartime shipyards moved in, doubling in size, doubling again. The Chamber of Commerce had yelled with joy, until the trouble came. . . .

The papers had called it a crime wave, but it was more than that. It was a war, with the police on the losing side.

The old River City, the quiet and pleasant place was gone, along with the friendly elms. Shack Town sprouted out of the barren hills overnight, and there were more miles of street out there than in all of River City before the boom.

There weren't half enough men on the force to do a policing job. The budget was too small. There weren't enough prowl cars, or beat men, or jail cells — not enough of anything.

Shack Town had it first. Big Charlie Donechek moved in out there with games and girls and slots, and as fast as one of his joints was slapped down two others opened their doors. Nor was Shack Town enough; the trouble spread. The men of the force were tired, overworked and underpaid; there weren't enough of them to go around. The games and the girls came across the tracks, and then no street of River City was safe for a woman after dark. The shipyards ran twenty-four hours a day and so did the places on Mulvaney Avenue — Big Charlie's Avenue. Big Charlie took the town; he owned the town. He had all the quick and easy money right there in the palm of his meaty hand — until he died. . . .

"Chief." It was the desk intercom. "Pat Ryan's here to see you."

McClary turned and touched a switch. "Send him in."

He lifted his shoulders, squaring them, as he waited for the door to open. Pat Ryan was a big and quiet man. He wore banker's gray and wore it well. His close-cropped hair was a wild, fire-red; his voice was soft and carefully controlled, the voice of a businessman.

"A pleasant day," he said as he came in. "But cool."

"Sit down," Chief McClary said.

"It's been a long time." Ryan took the chair beside the desk. Only his freckled hand betrayed his anger; he did not seem aware of the knotting of his hand. "I thought we'd have a talk. It's time we did. Cooper and

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some of your men raided the Red Wheel last night. They wrecked it, Chief. Do you mind if I ask why?"

McClary said, "It wasn't my idea."

"What happens to the agreement?" Pat Ryan asked. "I've lived up to my end of it — to the letter of it."

"I know that," McClary said.

"Cooper's your boy, Chief. He owes you a lot."

"He doesn't owe me anything."

"You can make him listen to reason," Pat Ryan argued.

"He's young and ambitious," McClary said. "He's trying to do a job."

"He's trying to be Saint George on a white horse," Pat Ryan said. "Tell him I can understand that he wants to make a showing. I'll even help arrange it. But not in the Red Wheel. That's a permanent installation and it wasn't designed to be chopped full of holes. The equipment out there is not the kind we give away in raids. Chief, I want that equipment back."

"I'll talk to Cooper," McClary said.

"Do." Pat Ryan left his chair. "Our agreement still holds," he said. "But if you're getting ideas, there's this to think about: Nothing's changed, Chief. We're sitting on an atom bomb. If it explodes, we both go up. If I were you, I'd remember that."

McClary said, "I'll call you, Pat."

Pat Ryan went away. Chief of Police Walter McClary turned his chair to look out into the street again.

"Chief." It was the desk intercom again. "We got a kid out here."

McClary touched the switch. "I'm busy. No — bring him in."

There was time in the moment before the opening of the door to remember the hundreds who'd come to stand before the desk. Their names were gone, sponged out of his memory. Almost all of them, boys and girls alike, had worn the same strained face, the same kid-in-trouble look, compounded of bluster and guilt and fear. And this one had the look — this scrawny boy of ten or twelve whose restless eyes flicked from Davis, plain-clothes, to the chief and back again. A Shack Town kid, shabby but hard-scrubbed; patched overalls and broken shoes and a soup-bowl haircut.

"Sticky fingers," Davis said. "Tried to clean the five-and-dime."

The boy said, "I meant to pay. Honest, mister —"

"Empty your pockets," Davis said.

The boy obeyed, the last of his faint bluster gone. His mouth was trembling like the mouths of the others who'd passed before this desk. The flimsy, glittering things he heaped upon the blotter had all been there before: a tin-bladed pocketknife, a packet of fishhooks, a fat box of crayons and an automatic pencil that was a bright, fire-engine red.

"Busy little guy," Davis said. "Grabbin' with both hands."

Chief McClary said, "I'll take it, Paul."

He waited until the plainclothesman had gone. "You'd better sit down," he said then. "We've got to talk about this. We've got to decide

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what to do with you." The words were old; the routine words. "If that knife belonged to you and I took it —" Saying that, McClary found himself thinking the boy perched on the edge of the leather chair had, like all of them, the look of an animal in a trap.

"You have to pay for what you take," McClary said.

"Yes." The boy's voice was faint. "I know that, sir."

His shirt and overalls had been torn and neatly mended. His shoes — there was nothing a mother without money could do about worn shoes.

"Do you go to church?" McClary said. "Or Sunday school?"

This boy would be all right. He was still malleable. Some were not . . .

A pinched and hating face came out of memory — the face of a boy who had already been molded and hardened before he came to sit in the leather chair. The snub-nosed boy, Hal, had been one of those: wild and tough — a kid with dirty hands and dirty face, and hair that hadn't been washed for weeks. He was eleven years old and already an accomplished thief. Hal's mother was dead; his father was a construction worker — whenever he worked, which wasn't often. The old man was a drunk who slept wherever he happened to fall after the bars were closed.

"Sure I steal," Hal had said. "How else am I goin' to eat?"

McClary said, "You stole a bicycle. You can't eat that."

"I can sell it and buy stuff to eat."

"No," McClary said. "Trouble's what you buy. Where's your father?"

"Out bummin' drinks — the damn' old soak!"

Chief McClary winced. It would take more than words to touch this boy.

"Dinnertime," McClary said. "How'd you like to eat with me?"

"Hell with it — hell with you!" Anger flared in the boy's black eyes. "I ain't asked you for anything!"

"It's the other way around," McClary said carefully. "My wife's in the hospital. A man gets tired of eatin' by himself. It's lonesome work. Besides, a little table talk helps digest your food — that's what the doctors say."

"Well," the boy said, "why didn't you say that first?"

The biggest steak in town was not enough to fill the void in Hal. But ice cream helped — ice cream and pie and four glasses of milk. Then, quite suddenly, he wore a look half-sheepish, half-guilty. "I got eatin'," he said. "I guess I kind of forgot to talk."

McClary said, "It doesn't matter. There's lots of time."

Now Chief McClary was alone again. The boy with the soup-bowl haircut was gone — impressed and awed by his talk with the chief. Long ago, McClary had learned that the beat men and the prowl-car men were just everyday cops to the kids of River City. A lecture by a man who helps you across a busy street on your way to school does not mean much,

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but when you are ten or twelve, the shine of a chief's brass buttons is like the gleam in the eye of God.

The boy who had just left had made his one appearance here; he would not be back. But Hal — Chief McClary decided he must be getting old. All through this past hour he'd been talking to one boy and thinking of another. Hal — that pinched and hating face. Both the River Street beat man and the jailer had been sure time spent on Hal was time chucked down the drain. "I've seen a lot of hard-nosed brats," the jailer'd said. "But that one's plumb no good. Be nice to him and you'll get your belly kicked in for your trouble."

"He's been eleven years getting off the track," McClary had said. "We can't expect to put him back in just one day."

It had taken time to find an opening in the wall of bitterness around the dirty-handed boy. Then certain arrangements had to be made: a shambling ruin of a man was plucked from a doorway in an alley off River Street and put upon a train; a middle-aged woman, more self-contained and competent than most, decided she was ill. The spring steel in Hal was pride. He could steal to eat, but he could not beg. "My mom said charity's a sorry thing," he explained. "Right up to when she died, she never asked for anything."

The snub-nosed boy could not be pushed. "Jail ain't so bad," he said. "I'd rather be in jail than have somebody preachin' at me all the time." Lectures were a waste of breath. "Plenty of guys don't get caught — next time you won't catch me." He was not afraid of punishment; he'd had too much punishment. "My old man caught me goin' through his pants pockets. He used his belt — the buckle end." The snub-nosed boy was tough and unafraid; but he could be persuaded, finally, to do a favor for a friend.

"A woman I know needs help," McClary told Hal. "A widow lady and not too strong. She keeps askin' me to find somebody to mow her lawn and chop the wood and keep an eye on the place. She's got a little spare room you could use."

"What about my old man?" Hal asked.

"Well," McClary said, "he doesn't seem to be in town. There isn't a lot of construction here just now. He's probably moved on."

"Sure," the boy said. "Then he'll send for me."

McClary nodded. "I'd count it as a favor if you'll help this lady for me until he does."

"How do you know I won't steal from her?" Hal asked.

"Because you'd get me in trouble if you did," McClary said . . .

The telephone on McClary's desk rang. "Chief." It was Pete Simmons' voice. "I've just had a talk with Cooper. He's going before the grand jury with what he's got and he's got more than enough for an indictment. And then the balloon goes up."

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Chief McClary said, "Thanks, Pete."

"You're welcome." The reporter's voice was carefully wooden. "Chief, somebody should tell Cooper exactly what he's up against."

"Somebody will," McClary said.

He put the telephone back in its cradle. The pocketknife, the fishhooks, crayons and red automatic pencil still lay on the blotter. Chief McClary swept them into a brown envelope for return to the manager of the five-and-ten-cent store. He was still thinking of Hal, remembering a day when he'd sat with the boy on an army cot in Madge Sorenson's spare room. He'd watched the boy read a message on a yellow sheet. "Killed," the typed words said, "on construction job while trying to save the life of a fellow workman." He'd watched the boy's jaws shut hard and had seen the stone composure of his face crumble as the tears came. "What I always thought," the boy had whispered. "My old man was all right except when . . . when whisky had him licked."

"Tough," McClary'd said. "They tell me he was about to send for you. He was doin' fine, stayin' sober, workin' hard. There was some money left after the expenses were paid. It's in the bank in your name."

He'd left Hal sitting on the army cot, smoothing the sheet of yellow paper carefully on his knee. In the hall he had met Madge Sorenson carrying a tray. "Aspirin," she'd said, "hot milk and a shoulder as big as a pillow for a boy to cry against." McClary had smiled and patted her arm. Then he'd gone back to the station to make sure the terse report telling of the death of a burned-out shell of a man under the wheels of a boxcar in a city a thousand miles away did not find a place in the records. . . .

The telephone rang again, breaking in on McClary's memories. This time the voice was a woman's. "Chief McClary? This is Mr. Cooper's secretary. The district attorney would like to speak to you after lunch. Will 2 o'clock be convenient?"

"Tell him I'll be there," McClary said.

The desk clock said it was almost noon. The morning was gone — and nothing done except a talk with a boy who'd helped himself in the five-and-ten. Chief McClary pressed a switch on the desk intercom. "I'd like a sandwich and some milk," he said.

He turned to watch the flow of traffic in the street again. After a little time Hansen, a big, sunburned rookie cop came in with a cardboard box. Hansen was one of the new crop, young and serious. He spent his spare time studying.

"How goes the day?" McClary asked.

"Quiet, sir," Hansen said. "Very quiet — the way we like it."

Chief McClary watched Hansen turn and leave the room. A youngster, but he'd do to take along. He liked it quiet, but he'd be there in the thick

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of it if trouble broke. It would have been nice to have a man that good working flank the night Big Charlie died. Bloody Monday. Chief McClary thought of that day, remembered it, and cold sweat started beneath his arms. . . .

Bloody Monday was the day the gang war in River City had flared into the open — a long time ago. Pat Ryan had crossed the boundaries established by Big Charlie in a dozen places; at noon that Monday the first of Ryan's juke boxes was smashed. Two hours later the streets were littered with the bones of his equipment — pinballs, vending machines and jukes. "All licensed," Pat Ryan said, "all operating legally. Chief, if you can't protect my property, I'll have to do the job myself."

"The force isn't big enough," McClary said.

Pat Ryan said, "And Charlie owns most of the force."

"One or two, maybe."

"All but you, and well you know it." Pat Ryan smiled. "Charlie says the town's not big enough for both of us. Maybe he's right, Chief."

Then it was dusk and there was wind and a driving rain. The streets of River City were deserted. Mulvaney Avenue was quiet for the first time in two years — the joints closed, the curtains drawn — until a sawed-off shotgun blew the windows from one saloon, until a car parked in front of another became a roaring torch, until revolver shots were fired in an alley between Mulvaney Street and the docks.

Gang warfare broke out in every part of the city. McClary, standing behind the dispatcher, saw the switchboard jammed before the sweep hand on the desk clock could complete a single round. He heard two squad cars report out-of-service almost instantly — their tires cut to ribbons on intersections strewn thickly with roofing nails. Two squad cars gone; at least two others manned by men Big Charlie owned. Calls were pouring in from almost every quarter of the city.

"Holy Mother!" the dispatcher said.

"Hang on," McClary said. "Do the best you can."

He snatched a riot gun from the rack above the desk and ran. The city cars were gone. He used his own. He lost it a dozen blocks from the station in a wild and sickening skid he could not control. His old sedan spun across the curb to crash against a store front at the foot of Orchard Street. Crude oil had been dumped at the hilltop; the pavement and the walks were slick as ice. Chief McClary learned that when he tried to run and fell heavily.

He lost the riot gun, in the crash or farther on. After that splintering impact it was hard to think clearly. It was hard to breathe; the steering wheel had slugged him high on the side, had broken something there. He got up the hill, clinging to the guard rail, clinging to the thought that had brought him here. At the dispatcher's

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desk he'd spotted the calls as they came in. Only one area was quiet — Big Charlie's country — and that made no sense unless the widely scattered shocks that ripped the night had been planned to pull the strength away from the restaurant building that was Big Charlie's home.

The arc lights in the shabby blocks beyond the hilltop had all been killed. Chief McClary paused to get his breath, to ease the bright hurting in his side. Violence flared in the darkness ahead. Glass shattered and someone yelled. There was the slamming of gunfire and running feet pounded away. More yells then and other feet running in pursuit. Chief McClary wiped his empty hands on his blouse and walked toward the source of the sounds.

The Flamingo — Big Charlie's restaurant. Dark now. The sidewalk was strewn with broken glass; the doors and windows gaped blackly; the awnings were torn and sagging. Chief McClary found the alley mouth beyond the building. He found an open, lighted doorway and climbed a flight of stairs. Down a short hall another door stood open. Chief McClary walked toward it, without haste or pause. A big voice spoke and McClary listened. ". . . You'll get no help. Not now. My lads sucked yours away. Try it now —" A moment of silence. Then: "Try it, damn you! Try —" And a gun roared once.

Chief McClary reached the doorway. Across the room Big Charlie sagged beside his desk, held from the floor by a right arm shoved deep into a desk drawer and caught there. Pat Ryan stood, back to the door, motionless as if he had been carved from wood. He held a gun at his side, the muzzle pointed at the floor. "Drop it, Pat," Chief McClary said. But the gun did not fall. Pat Ryan spun, the gun came up.

McClary's hands were at his sides, open and empty. "You're under arrest," he said.

"I'm under arrest?" Ryan held the gun pointed at Chief McClary's chest. McClary moved into the room, walking steadily toward Pat Ryan. His big hand came down slowly on the gun; then with a quick movement, he tore it from Pat Ryan's hand. Ryan flexed his fingers, staring at them.

"I'm under arrest," he said, lifting his eyes. "For what?"

"Murder," Chief McClary said.

Pat Ryan shook his head. It hadn't been murder; it had been self-defense. There was a gun in the drawer of Big Charlie's desk. The chief could check that. Big Charlie'd tried for that gun and Ryan had been a little faster. A man had a right to protect himself, didn't he? Chief McClary nodded. A man did — in his own home, in the defense of his life or property, a man had a right to shoot and kill. But the right here had been Big Charlie's, not Pat Ryan's. This was Big Charlie's home. Pat Ryan had come here to kill Big Charlie — that business of being just a little faster was a lot of rot. Big

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Charlie had tried to defend himself against an intruder.

"You're under arrest for murder," McClary said.

Pat Ryan's smile was white. "You've got me cold, then?"

"That I have."

"Now, tomorrow, or next year. Right?"

"Now," McClary said. "Right now."

Pat Ryan shook his head. "Chief — we can make a deal."

A deal with a mobster — a murderer. Chief McClary could well remember the cold rage that had flooded through him. Failure was possible. They could take his town, buy his men and turn the night into a bloody shambles. But a deal — no! But Pat Ryan had talked quickly, there in Donechek's office. And Chief McClary had found himself listening. Guiltily, he found himself thinking how much easier it was going to be to keep River City clean with Big Charlie out of the way. The chief experienced almost a sense of relief at the thought that in murdering Big Charlie, Ryan had solved one of the city's problems.

Now the intercom on McClary's desk spoke again. "Chief, the D.A.'s office called. It's two ten and you had a two-o'clock appointment."

"I'm on my way," McClary said.

He got out of his chair, smoothing his blouse with broad hands, taking his cap from the corner of the desk. He was tired. He was carrying too much weight, too much belly. The clerks in the outer office looked up as he walked past. Rookie Hansen smiled. Pete Simmons, the reporter, stood near the door, his teeth set in a cold cigar.

"How's to walk along with you?" Pete said.

"I'm just going —" McClary began.

"Across the street," Simmons said. "So am I."

The county courthouse had been built in a day when space was everything. The lower hall was a vast and shadowed place. Justice stood poised on a marble ball before the elevator cages. Pete Simmons bent his head. "A great old girl," he said. "I wonder if she knows how hard some men have to hustle to get her work done."

"What's that?" McClary asked.

"A sly dig at a man with flat feet."

They climbed the broad stairway together. Simmons took the cigar from his mouth as they reached the empty landing. "Do the kid a favor." His voice was barely audible. "Tell him they've got an out. If he goes into court with what he's got, they'll make him look like Johnny Chump. That's on the level, Chief."

"Where'd you hear this?" McClary asked.

"From a friend. I still got a friend."

Simmons left McClary at the stairhead, turning abruptly away. The chief went on and reached the door of frosted glass that bore the district attorney's name. Through the moment of time it took him to cross the anteroom he was remembering again. Hal Cooper — the boy with the

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pinched and hating face. The boy who'd sat on the cot in Madge Sorenson's spare room had come a long, long way. His face, still thin, was no longer pinched and tight. He was smiling as he came around the desk to take Chief McClary's hand.

"You're looking fine," he said. "It's good to see you, Chief."

"Thanks, Hal," McClary said. His voice was vague, for his mind had suddenly crowded with memories. It seemed such a little while ago that he'd taken Madge Sorenson to see Hal Cooper graduate. She had been very proud that day. "Every cent," she'd said. "He's paid back every cent, with interest. He's done it all on his own." Just a little while ago, and yet — Madge Sorenson was dead now — six years gone. Hal Cooper had a chair for the chief close by the corner of his desk. His own chair was half turned; light from a big window fell across his face. The chief looked at Hal Cooper through a moment of silence, seeing again the strength he'd seen long ago in the face of a boy. Lean cheeks, a rocky chin and a flat mouth. A fighter's face. The face of a man who'd be rough in any kind of scrap. That thought brought an odd tightening to Chief McClary's chest.

Hal Cooper's eyes were searching McClary's face. "That mug of yours," he said at last. "It tells me nothing. It never did. You always looked the same whether you were going to rawhide me, or pat me on the back. A tough proposition for a kid. It's no better for a man."

McClary said, "The kid knew what he had coming."

Cooper smiled a little. "And he got it, good or bad. Chief, I went around you last night. I didn't let you in on the raid. I didn't warn you it was coming. A rough way to treat you, wasn't it?"

McClary nodded. "It was."

Cooper's mouth tightened. "If there had been any other way, I would have used it. Believe that. Believe this, too: That raid was no spur-of-the-moment job. I've been working toward it for a long time." He turned his hands up. "Finally I realized there was only one way to find the house full when I kicked in the door. That was by going around you, Chief. I did it."

McClary said, "If you've got a name for me, say it."

"No names, Chief." Hal Cooper pushed to his feet and went to the window. "Out there" — he gestured at the city outside — "is a record that speaks for itself. We're proud of it, all of us. We know a cop named McClary gave it to us. He took a roaring boom town, a filthy town, and gave us a decent place to live. How? He had no money. The force was small and graft and corruption were hip-deep everywhere. He didn't do it barehanded and alone; no man could. He had a tool of some kind, a lever, and he used it well." Hal Cooper turned. "But there's one thing about a lever, Chief. It pries both ways."

McClary said, "I won't argue that."

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"So I didn't tell you about the raid."

"You do me no credit, boy," McClary said. "But we'll skip that." His eyes came up. "You say we've got a clean town here. Clean and quiet and no trouble. Why do you want to kick it apart?"

"To keep it clean," Hal Cooper said.

"I don't get it," McClary said. "Tell me more."

Hal Cooper said, "I will. But let me ask a question first. A lot of people are saying that thing last night was a splash to get my name in the papers — the young D.A. out to make a reputation. Others say I'm an empty-headed idealist. A green young squirt who needs an old head to take him aside and explain the facts of life. That trying to stop gambling, for example, is as foolish as telling men to stop eating. That one clean house is better than half a hundred clip games under cover. Chief, do you go along with either of those opinions?"

Chief McClary shook his head.

"Fine," Hal Cooper said. "Then maybe you'll believe the real reason. You and Pat Ryan had a nice balance worked out here. A little give, a little take — and the town came out ahead. That balance is shot now. Pat Ryan's spreading out."

Again McClary shook his head. "No," he said. "I'd know it."

"If it was a racket sure." Hal Cooper leaned forward. "I'm not talking about rackets. This is a different kind of operation — bigger, smoother and more dangerous. Pat Ryan is no Capone, Dutch Schultz or Big Charlie. He's a businessman. He knows you don't need guns and mob violence to milk a town or a state dry. The better way, the safer way, is to own the men in public office. Pat Ryan's in politics up to his ears, working quietly and very fast."

"Politics?" McClary said softly.

"You don't think that's dangerous?"

"First things first," McClary answered. "My job is to keep the town clean of rackets. Sure, Ryan's in politics. Everybody grabs at the brass ring at one time or another. You think it's dangerous." He shrugged. "You may be right; I wouldn't know. I'm a man who works with facts, not theories. One good, hard fact comes to mind now: Get rid of Ryan — if you can — and you leave the town wide open. Someone else will take his place. That man may be a Capone or a Big Charlie. Then what?"

"The gangsters are through," Hal Cooper said. "You made the town clean; we'll keep it clean. We're not a boom town now. We're a solid and respectable city — except for Pat Ryan and his rackets. That's why I'm getting rid of Ryan."

"You make it sound easy," McClary said. "Pat Ryan has — influence. He can make trouble for you."

"So I understand." Hal Cooper's mouth was hard and flat. "But I'm going ahead with it, anyway. I'd

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hoped I could work with your blessing. If not — well, the work's still to be done. This business last night was the opening gun. The first shot. I was a long time getting to it. I couldn't honestly avoid it any longer. I'll keep going until he's finished or I'm finished."

Chief McClary got out of his chair.

"Wait —" Hal Cooper was on his feet. The hardness was gone from his face; he put a lean hand on the chief's arm. "I wish there was some way I could —" He broke it off. "Damn it," he said. "Chief, anything I ever did, from the day I went to live at Madge Sorenson's, I always asked myself, 'How'll this look to the chief?' If you said it was right, it was right; if you said it was wrong, it was wrong. I'm still asking."

McClary said, "You were a kid then." His voice was slow. "You're a man now. Now you stand on your own two feet. Nobody can do your thinking for you now. Not me. Not anybody."

Hal Cooper's grip on McClary's arm tightened. "Thanks," he said.

Chief McClary went through the anteroom and into the hall. He paused at the head of the stairs to put on his cap. A man fell in step with him as he started down. It was Pete Simmons, his teeth still clenched on the cold cigar.

"Well?" Simmons' voice was soft.

"I didn't tell him, Pete. He wouldn't have listened."

Pete Simmons made a sound of regret. "What's pushing him?" he asked. "Does he want his face on page one? Does he like to see his name in print?"

"No," McClary said. "He's got a theory that Ryan's a bigger threat than the plague because Ryan's been messing around in politics. He thinks Ryan's going to take the whole state unless he's stopped. That's why he staged the raid. Cooper's going to stop Ryan now, or bust something."

They were in the lower hallway, moving toward the door. Pete Simmons pushed the bronze door wide and they went out into the street. "It's too bad," he said. "Cooper's a nice boy."

"Don't tell me you're buying that crazy notion?"

"You should take a look-around, Chief." Simmons rubbed the gritty stubble on his cheek. "I got a place to go and a man to see," he said. "But I'll keep in touch."

In his office, McClary found three telephone slips on his desk. He was reading them when Rookie Hansen came through the door, another slip in his hand. "More of the same, sir," he said. "Mr. Ryan again. I told him you were out of town."

"Why?" McClary said. "You knew I'd be back."

"I thought you'd like a little rest."

"Thanks," McClary said. "But you don't have to lie for me."

He waited until he was alone again and then dialed Pat Ryan's number. "McClary here," he said. "I saw Cooper."

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Pat Ryan said, "When do I get my equipment back?"

"You don't," McClary said.

"You mean your boy won't listen?"

"He's not my boy," McClary said. "Cooper's his own man, Pat."

"Chief," Pat Ryan said bleakly, "I've been nice about this. I gave you a chance to square it. I don't like to play rough. But if Cooper wants it that way, then that's the way it's going to be."

McClary said, "Pat —"

Pat Ryan had hung up. McClary pushed the telephone away. He thought of the past again, of the agreement he'd made in the office of Big Charlie Donechek. "Look, chief," Pat Ryan had said. "I cleaned your town for you. I did your work — work you couldn't do. You can nail me for it, sure. But if you do someone else moves in."

"Pat," McClary had said. "Save your breath."

"Someone else will buy your cops. That won't be hard, Chief. They've had their hands out; they like the extra dough. Forget it — and your men will belong to you again. I've never had a cop on my payroll. I never will. Between us, we can keep the town the way it is right now — clean."

"What'll you get out of it?" McClary had asked.

Now Rookie Hansen came in to place a cardboard container of coffee on the desk. He grinned and went quietly away. Chief McClary turned to the window, his flow of thought disturbed. The sun was well down. The stores would be closing soon; River City would be sitting down to dinner. Then, in the dusk, the school kids would be heading for the early shows. What was it Hal Cooper had said? ". . . a little give, a little take, and the town comes out ahead."

River City had come out ahead. With Big Charlie gone, the clip joints on Mulvaney closed, the men of the force had had time to make the streets as safe as any in the country. They'd had time to treat kid trouble for what it was. The slots were gone. Other cities around the state had problems, but the hustlers stayed far away from River City; Pat Ryan saw to that. One by one, the cops who'd been on Big Charlie's payroll had been replaced. The Red Wheel was the only gambling joint in town; the games out there were honest games. ". . . a little give, a little take . . ." But now the balance had been destroyed. Now —

Shadows thickened in all the corners of the room. Outside, headlights were coming on. A group of children cut across the station lawn; Chief McClary heard them laughing beneath the window. He thought of the endless file of youngsters who'd come to stand before his desk. He was thinking of them still when the door opened upon the bulky shape of Pete Simmons.

"Never mind the light," Pete said. "I'm an old man and old men like to sit in the dark."

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"Is that what you came to say?"

"No." Simmons' voice was tired. "I came to rest my feet and tell you to stop fretting. Pat Ryan moved fast. He had to, because the grand jury sits tomorrow. He gave Cooper a choice. If Cooper drops it now he can be a big man; if he doesn't drop it he gets his teeth kicked in."

"A big man?"

"Governor or senator — whichever seems best when the time comes. Ryan would rather have Cooper on his side than fight him. But he'll fight, if the kid gives the wrong answers. One way or another, he'll smear the kid — out of the D.A.'s office, out of the courthouse, out of town."

McClary said, "He can't."

"A lot of men have said that about Pat," Simmons said. "Someday when I'm not so tired I'll make you a list. Big Charlie thought Pat Ryan couldn't buck him, and wherever is Big Charlie now? And whatever became of Big Charlie's men and equipment?" He sighed. "Do you ever read the papers, Chief? Do you ever wonder why so many little towns around the state are having trouble? Charlie's been dead five years. Have you ever counted the men Pat Ryan knows who've been elected here and there in those five years?"

"You talk too much," McClary said.

"Old men do," Pete Simmons said. "This morning I told you the roof was going to fall in. Turns out I was wrong. Pat's got it fixed. No matter what Cooper does — or tries to do — he won't hurt anybody in this town."

There was no censure in his voice. Pete Simmons was a good reporter assembling the facts for a friend. He was fat, a mussed, untidy man and a fair hand with a bottle. Many things could be said of Pete, but not that he was a liar. Things Pete Simmons said were true; he was an old head; he'd been around long enough to know. So have I, McClary thought with sudden bitterness. Warming the chief's chair with the seat of my pants for eighteen years. But counting the leaves and ignoring the trees. I settled for safe streets and a quiet town. I'm the man who let Ryan get big. I made him big —

He thought of Hal Cooper then. Hal would not wear Pat Ryan's shirt; Hal would tell Pat to go to hell, no matter what the cost. He'd fight with the small weapons he had, knowing he could not win, but fighting anyway. Then a bitter memory turned in McClary's mind. A man can be slugged by circumstance, can be hammered until he makes a compromise. Walter McClary had made a compromise. He'd stood with a bloody face and a caved-in side and made his deal. Tired of fighting, he'd settled for quiet streets and a quiet town. He'd counted the leaves while Pat Ryan stole the trees.

"The kid can't win with what he's got," Pete Simmons said. "But the pup is going to try. Pat Ryan sent one of his goons to try to talk him out of it. Cooper kicked the goon out."

"He would," McClary said.

He left his desk, smoothing his

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blouse across his paunch with big, uncertain hands. He went into the outer office where the squat safe stood under the eyes of the dispatcher and the two night-duty men. He spun the dial — left, then right, then left — and the door handle of the safe gave beneath his hand. He used his key on an inner compartment. He put the box he found there under his arm and took it to his desk.

"A minute ago you asked me whatever became of Big Charlie," he said to Pete. "It just happens I can answer that. I was in the Flamingo, in the hall outside his door, the night he died. I've got the gun he was killed with here in this box, together with a document signed by a man named Pat Ryan."

"A what?" Pete Simmons said.

"A confession," Chief McClary said. "It's the thing I had, the lever I used to keep River City clean. It isn't much of a tool. Pat Ryan stopped worrying about it some time ago. Because if it gets one, it gets both — the lever pries both ways." He switched the desk lamp on and left his chair to place the box in Pete Simmons' lap. "For delivery to the district attorney," he said. "After you've used it on page one."

"Given me by a public-spirited citizen?" Pete said. "That's thin, Chief, but it might be cover enough."

"Given you by Walter McClary," Chief McClary said.

"Chief." There was regret in Pete Simmons' eyes. "This can be rough. Suppression of evidence and dereliction of duty — those two for sure. Maybe accessory after the fact. They can hit you with the book —"

"That's for the court to decide."

Chief McClary stood before the window looking out into the night. He watched the run of traffic on the streets of the quiet town. Behind him, Pete Simmons moved uneasily in the leather chair.

"When they find out why," he said, "when the jury understands why, Chief, they'll probably be decent."

"You can be sure of one thing," McClary said, and there was pride in his voice. "Pete, the prosecution will do its best."

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MUCH HAS HE TRAVELED IN THE REALMS OF GOLD . . .

We are indebted to the Publicity Department of Random House for the following lively and amusing data on David Dodge, whose first appearance in EQMM is indeed a welcome one:

David Dodge became a public accountant in 1935 because, in his own words, public accounting seemed preferable to death by starvation during The Great Depression. The job lasted seven years and provided Mr. Dodge with enough material to write his first two detective novels, DEATH AND TAXES *and* SHEAR THE BLACK SHEEP. *Macmillan published both these books, but in the process they lost their Pacific Coast editor, Elva Keith, who married Dodge. The pattern of give-and-take continued, for Mr. Dodge's third detective novel,* BULLETS FOR THE BRIDEGROOM, *helped pay the bills incurred when daughter Kendal was born.*

Then came Pearl Harbor, and Dodge gave up public accounting permanently and writing temporarily. After the war the Dodges decided to make up for lost time: the three of them set out to see the world in a perfectly peaceful fashion via the Pan American skyways. Daddy Dodge started writing a letter to his friends in the States, telling all about the first leg of their trip, through Mexico and Guatemala. The letter got so voluminous that Dodge concluded it would be more economical to publish it as a book, and send out copies, than to mail carbons to all and sundry by air. Thus, his best-selling travel story, HOW GREEN WAS MY FATHER.

The Dodges are still on the go, and out of their globe-trotting have come four more travel books and five more detective novels, to say nothing of numerous articles and short stories. How does he do it? Very simple. You see, traveling not only gives Dodge material for his travel books but also interesting backgrounds for his murder mysteries — all of which pays for further travel — which in turn permits Mr. Dodge to gather more material for more travel books and more murder mysteries — which in turn finances still more trips resulting in — but you get the point. Our wish for the Dodges is: and so on, ad infinitum . . .

POSTSCRIPT: After the above was written, Random House published David Dodge's THE POOR MAN'S GUIDE TO EUROPE, *which is already an impressive bestseller. As the "Saturday Review" said, Mr. Dodge's new travel book tells many ways of "seeing Europe at wholesale prices . . . ways of squeezing the last red Indian out of your dollar."*

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MURDER IS NO ACCIDENT

by DAVID DODGE

THE MURDER WASN'T EVEN A SIDE issue to my job, just a coincidence. I had dropped off a train at this little town in the Santa Clara valley to check on a bank embezzlement for a surety company that was paying me a monthly retainer. The sheriff already had the embezzler in hock, so all I had to do was talk to the bank officials and see if they intended to prosecute or leave it up to the surety company. But it was Saturday noon before I got there, and the bank president had left town for the week end. I had to wait around until Monday to see him. That was how I happened to be at the golf club Sunday afternoon, when somebody knocked off a man named Hal French.

The sheriff took me to the club for lunch. It was a nice setup for a small town — eighteen holes of good grass, tennis courts, a swimming pool. The weather was hot and the pool was full of swimmers. When we passed the pool on our way up from the parking lot, a girl wearing a red bathing suit was struggling, not too hard, to keep a couple of huskies in swimming trunks from throwing her in. She yelled "Hi!" and "Help!" at the sheriff just as the boys got her by the wrists and ankles, swung her a couple of times, and heaved. She went under with a shriek of laughter.

I would have noticed her even if she hadn't yelled at us. She was a small brunette with a figure like a pin-up, and the two swatches of red Lastex she wore didn't do the figure any harm. The rest of the women in and around the pool could have gone home for all the attention they were getting. It was a good bet that the brunette wouldn't be popular with the local females.

I said, "Cute girl."

The sheriff grunted. "Too cute for her own good."

He didn't say any more, and I didn't ask questions. We sat down at a table on the veranda of the clubhouse and looked around for a waiter. Before we could order anything, a skinny man in a white coat came tearing around the corner of the veranda as if his pants were on fire. When he saw the sheriff, he stopped short. "My golly, Sheriff, I'm glad you're here!" His face was as white as his coat. "You better come with me!"

"What's the matter, Charlie?"

"Somebody killed Hal French!"

The sheriff's reaction was strange. He looked down toward the pool, where the little brunette was playing you-splash-me-and-I'll-splash-you with the guys who had pitched her in. It was several seconds before he answered. "Who knows about it?"

"Just the Garrett boys and Tom Chester. They're in the locker room

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with —" the skinny man's voice broke — "the body."

"All right, Charlie." The sheriff stood up. "Don't say anything to anybody else. We'll take a look."

The "we" was all the invitation I needed. I followed them around the corner of the clubhouse and along a spike-scarred path to the locker room.

Charlie closed the door behind us when we went in. There was another door opening into what looked like the main club room, and an archway leading off to the showers. The sheriff walked over to lock the door to the club room before he did anything else.

The place smelled like any other locker room — sweaty. Three men, naked except for bath towels twisted around their middles, stood looking down at a body on the floor. The dead man wore a pair of loud shorts and one sock. He was big, without much fat on him, and had a Hollywood haircut that curled behind his ears. His feet were under a wooden bench and his head was cramped up against the base of a row of steel lockers. His jaw, hanging open, didn't look right. Four of the lockers were open, and a round tray with four tall drinks on it sat on the bench. A putter with a thick-weighted head lay on the floor near the body. That was all I noticed right away, except that water was splashing on cement somewhere in the shower room.

The sheriff said, "Hello, Pat. Harry. Tom."

The three men all said hello as if it hurt them to move their mouths. The sheriff went over to the body and knelt beside it. First he felt for a heartbeat, then wiggled the loose jaw and ran his hand around under the back of the head. There was blood on his fingers when he stood up.

"His jaw is broken," he said as he watched the faces of the three. "His head must have hit the locker when he went down. What happened?"

Nobody answered right away. Charlie was clear across the room, standing guard by the door we had come in, and I could hear his breathing. Finally one of the men — a stocky guy, short-legged, but built good above the towel — said, "We don't know. We were all in the showers when Charlie yelled. We ran out and found Hal lying there. He must have fallen and hit his head."

"He didn't hit the back of his head and break his jaw at the same time," the sheriff said.

None of them had an answer to that. The sheriff's eyes wandered from one man to another. They all had the same tight, guarded expression on their faces.

"Anybody in the showers, Charlie?" he said.

Charlie left the door and went into the shower room. The water stopped running. He came out and said, "No, sir. They left the showers going when I called them."

"How long ago was that?"

"A minute, maybe two, before I found you. Mister Pat sent me to telephone your office. I was on my

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way to the phone when I saw you."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Mister Pat sent me for drinks. When I came back, they were in the showers and I saw Mister Hal lying there. I thought he had fainted or something until I saw his face." Charlie swallowed hard. "Then I guess I just yelled. They all came running out together."

The sheriff looked at the man who stood farthest from the body.

"You seem to have given all the orders so far, Pat. Suppose you tell us everything that happened today."

The man he spoke to was a couple of years older than the one who had talked first, but they looked enough alike to be brothers — same features, same coloring, same stocky build. That made them the Garrett boys; and the third man, a tall slim kid with a thin crop of blond hair on his chest, was Tom Chester. I wanted to get it straight because nobody was bothering with introductions.

Pat Garrett said, "We had our regular foursome this morning. Lila wanted to swim, so I brought her along. She and I picked Harry up on the way and met Hal here. Tommy had a flat tire and was late, so we got a late start. We played eighteen holes, came into the locker room together, and stripped to take a shower. I sent Charlie for the drinks. When I went into the shower room, Harry was showing Tommy his new putter and Hal was still undressing. A minute or so later, I heard Harry and Tom come into the shower room and the showers start up. Three or four minutes after that, Charlie called us."

The sheriff turned to Pat's brother. "Hal was alone here when you and Tommy went into the showers?"

"Yes." Harry's voice was like Pat's, deliberately flat. "It was the first time I had used the putter, and Tommy wanted to see it. After he finished with it, Hal wanted to swing it. We left him trying it out."

"Nobody else was in the locker room or the showers?"

"No."

"Anything to add to that, Tom?"

The tall blond kid shook his head. He wasn't as cool as either of the others, but he didn't seem any more nervous than was reasonable in the circumstances. He said, "That's the way it was, Sheriff."

"Charlie."

"Yes, sir."

"Which way did you go when you went for the drinks?"

Charlie pointed at the door the sheriff had locked.

"You didn't meet anybody coming in or going out?"

"No, sir. I don't say nobody came in or went out, but I didn't see anybody. I was gone about five minutes, and the outside door was open. Anybody could have —"

"All right, Charlie. That will do for now. Go telephone my office. Tell Max there's been a killing here, and to call the coroner. Don't talk to anyone else. Wait until the coroner gets here, and then bring him in."

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"Yes, sir."

Charlie went away. The sheriff said, "Better get some clothes on, boys."

While they were dressing, he got down on his hands and knees to look at the putter, not touching it. I was more interested in the damp footprints that led from the shower room to where the three half-naked men were standing, but the prints were too smeary and too nearly dry for me to make anything out of them. I wandered into the shower room.

There were six shower stalls, uncurtained. They were in the middle of the room — two banks of three each, backed up against each other. I was feeling the hot-water pipes when the sheriff came in.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Looking for warm pipes."

"What will that give you?"

"I thought it would help to know what showers they were using."

I showed him the three showers that had been last used. Two were on the side away from the archway; one faced it.

"The man on this side could have gone out and come back without being seen by the other two. Either of them might have come and gone without being seen by the other man on his side, but he'd have to take a chance that the man on this side wasn't facing the door. You could ask a few questions along those lines."

He said, "Maybe I will." But he didn't move. Something else was on his mind.

I said, "Of course if they're covering up for each other —"

"What makes you so sure one of them did it?" He wasn't looking at me. "Hal was alone out there for three or four minutes. Anybody who saw him come in could have followed him, done the job, and made a getaway before Charlie got back."

"Sure."

"Those boys aren't killers. I've known them all since they were kids."

"Okay." I turned away.

He stopped me. "You don't believe it could have happened that way?"

I said, "It's nothing to me. I'll believe anything you want to hand out. But what kind of a nut, planning to kill a man, would follow him into a locker room on the bare chance that he would find him alone, the attendant gone, and three other men out of sight in the showers long enough for him to commit murder and get away without being seen?"

The sheriff took his hand off my arm. I said, "Either Charlie did it, or one of those three left the showers for a couple of minutes while Charlie was gone. The others may be covering up for him and they may not. If it were up to me, I'd find out which one had a motive for knocking him off and then put the pressure on until he cracked."

There was a stool in a corner by the towel rack. The sheriff went over to it and sat down. His shoulders sagged. "They all had a motive," he said. "The same one."

"What was it?"

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"Lila Garrett, Pat's wife. The girl in the red bathing suit."

I got the wrong idea. He saw it in my face. He said, "No, I don't mean it that way. Tom's her brother, and Harry thinks Pat is a tin god. It was Hal."

"He was playing around?"

"He was trying to play around. You saw that business at the pool. Lila is too — friendly. There's nothing bad about her, but you could get the wrong impression if you didn't know her. Hal was new in this town. He was Pat's boss at the packing plant, and Pat put him up for the club, invited him to his house, introduced him to people. He saw a lot of Lila, naturally, and Pat's job takes him out of town two or three times a week. Lila likes a good time, and Hal took her places when Pat wasn't around. There's been a lot of talk about it. You know how it is in a small town."

"Nothing behind the talk?"

"Not as far as Lila's concerned. I know her. She's as square as they come. But I think Hal was getting ideas."

"Looks like Pat's your man, then. He was the one who sent Charlie out of the locker room."

"I know him, too. I know them all." The sheriff sighed miserably. "Damn it, I just can't see them as killers. Any one of them would punch Hal in the nose if he had it coming. But murder —" He shook his head.

"Maybe one of them punched him in the chin."

"Hard enough to break his jaw — kill him?" The sheriff shook his head again. "I wish I believed it."

"What do you think happened?"

"I think somebody swung that golf club at him. I think it caught him on the chin, broke his jaw, and knocked him into the locker hard enough to crack his head. And I don't think it was an accident."

"No," I said. "It wasn't an accident."

I walked over to the archway and looked out. The three men were dressed. They stood just where they had stood before, in a row by the bench, waiting. They weren't talking, but if I ever saw the Three Musketeers in the flesh, they were it. *One for all and all for one* stuck out all over them.

I said, "Do you want to break it or cover it up?"

The sheriff's eyebrows drew down in a scowl. I said, "If you want to break it, you're in a tough spot. You have to pin it on somebody you like, and it's going to hurt, now and later. You'll do better to bring in outside help — somebody neutral."

He went on scowling. I said, "It will cost you $1. No guarantee."

He reached into his pocket without a word and handed me a silver dollar. I said, "I'm retained. Better introduce me, so they'll answer questions."

We went back to the locker room. He introduced me, without explaining who I was or anything else except that they were to answer questions. They looked at me the way three tomcats watch a strange dog coming down the street.

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I said, "Which one of you was using the shower facing the doorway?"

Pat Garrett said, "I was."

"You didn't leave it at any time until Charlie called you?"

"No."

"You didn't see any other person leave the shower room?"

"Not until we all left together."

"Could you see the doorway?"

"When I was looking that way and had my eyes open. I washed my hair. There was a lot of soap in my face."

"Could anybody have left the shower room and returned without you seeing him?"

"I don't know."

The other two gave me the same kind of co-operation. They answered questions and wouldn't make any guesses. They hadn't seen anything or heard anything until Charlie called them. I was wrong about their being the Three Musketeers. They were the three little monkeys — See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil.

Charlie came in with the coroner while I was still trying to develop an angle. The coroner made a quick examination of the body and said, "Broken jaw, possible fractured skull. I can't tell about the skull for sure without an autopsy."

"Which injury killed him?"

"I can't answer that without an autopsy."

"In your opinion, could a blow with that golf club —" I pointed at it — "have caused either injury?"

The coroner bent down to look at the head of the putter. It was smooth, and nothing showed on it but a few grass stains. He said carefully, "In my opinion, a strong blow with that club would have damaged either his face or his skull considerably more than they appear to be damaged. A blow of exactly the right strength might have caused either injury, yes."

I thanked him.

A couple of the sheriff's men had come along with the coroner. They helped him get the body into a wicker basket and carried it outside. When they lifted it, something that had been underneath the body rolled across the floor. I picked it up.

It was an ordinary flashlight battery, a small, heavy, tubular steel cell about two inches long and an inch in diameter. I waited until Charlie had closed the door behind the coroner and the sheriff's men before I said, "Whose is this?"

Tom Chester said, "Mine."

I tested it with my tongue across the terminals and didn't even get a taste. It was as dead as the body in the coroner's basket. I said, "What good is a dead flashlight battery?"

"I've been using it to improve my grip. I'm trying to cure a hook."

"Let's see."

I tossed it to him. He laid it in the bend of his fingers, where the shaft of a golf club goes if it's held right, clenched his hand around it, relaxed his grip, and clenched it again.

"I work on it whenever my hands aren't busy," he said.

I said, "I've known golfers to exercise their fingers on a rubber ball. I

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never heard of anyone using a flashlight cell."

"It's better than a rubber ball. It's shaped more like the shaft of a club. There's more resistance to —"

That was as far as he got. Everybody around the club must have seen the basket going out to the coroner's wagon, because there was a hell of a hullabaloo outside. The door banged open before Charlie could catch it.

He stopped everybody but the little brunette in the red bathing suit. He couldn't have held her with a net. She ducked under his arm, and threw herself on Pat Garrett's chest.

"Pat! Pat!" She hugged him. "Oh, you're all right! I was so scared! What happened?"

Nobody else answered her, so I did. "Hal French was murdered."

She looked at me, and her face went white. Then she looked at her husband. Then she looked at her brother. Then she looked at her brother-in-law, her head turning like a clockwork doll's. There wasn't a sound in the locker room for a minute except the whispered gabble of the people peering over Charlie's shoulder in the doorway.

The girl took a deep breath and said, "Oh." That was all. She sat down on the bench as if her good-looking legs were tired. The three men stood there with the same old poker faces.

The sheriff cleared his throat and bent over to pick up the putter, holding it by the shaft close to the head. "Guess we ought to see if we can get any prints from this," he said. "Not much hope of picking anything off the leather, but it's worth a try."

"I'm more interested in the flashlight battery," I said. "What was it doing under the body?"

Tom Chester said slowly, "I don't know. It must have dropped out of my coat when I hung it in the locker."

"Which is your locker?"

"That one."

He pointed. It was a couple of feet from where the body had been lying.

"You carry the battery in your coat pocket?"

"Yes."

"How long have you carried it?"

"A month. Maybe six weeks."

"Has it helped your hook?"

"Some."

His answers had been coming slower and slower. Everybody knew that I was getting at something more important than his hook. But I wanted to think before I asked the next question. I wasn't sure about one thing.

I stepped over to his locker, took a driver from the bag of clubs inside, and emptied the ball pocket.

"I'd like to see you all hit a few drives," I said.

Somebody, I don't know who, let out his breath. Nobody asked why I was picking that particular time to promote a driving contest. We left the locker room, pushed our way through the crowd outside, and went out to the first tee.

Charlie followed us. So did the crowd. It was the quietest gallery I've ever seen. I handed Tom Chester the driver and teed up the ball for him.

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His nerves were good. He hit three clean balls. One went down the middle of the fairway, two hooked almost to the rough. He looked at me expectantly. I didn't say anything.

Pat Garrett was next. He hit them all down the middle — one, two, three, straight as a string, and not one closer than the 250-yard marker. His wife and I were the only ones who didn't watch the balls in flight. She never took her eyes off his face. In that next-to-nothing bathing suit, without any of the help that a lot of women get from the right kind of clothes and with most of her make-up left behind in the pool, she was still one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen. I could understand why French had been getting ideas. And I could understand how somebody who knew her and loved her might have felt when the talk went around, when the cats on the fence were gossiping . . .

Harry topped his first drive. The second one was pretty good, and the third one ended up twenty yards farther out than any of Pat's. They all looked at me, waiting.

I said, "Let's go back to the locker room."

The gallery was right behind us. I shut the door before they could follow us in, but there was no key. I held the door until Charlie brought a chair to wedge under the doorknob, and then I pushed him outside. I had the door closed and wedged shut before he could argue.

The sheriff said, "What's on your mind?"

"Do you still want me to earn my retainer, Sheriff?"

He knew I had it then. He hesitated for only a moment. "Go ahead."

I turned around. Lila Garrett faced me, holding her husband's arm. Her brother stood at her side, and Harry was at Pat's elbow. One for all, all for one.

I said, "Mrs. Garrett, I'm a stranger here. Excuse me for what I'm going to say, because I'm only repeating what I've been told. There's been talk about you and Hal French. That kind of talk gets around in a small town. People make something out of nothing. Your husband and your brother and your brother-in-law knew there was nothing in it, at least as far as you were concerned, but they wanted the talk stopped. They must have all thought about it for a long time, wondering what to do. This afternoon, one of them decided to tell Hal French to watch his step."

She didn't blink an eye. They all waited for me to continue.

I said, "He didn't want to bring anyone else into it. He meant it to be a private talk between himself and French. The opportunity came when French was alone here and the others were in the showers. One of them slipped out quietly and came back to the locker room. He had made up his mind to back up his talk with his fists if he had to. He didn't intend to kill French, and he didn't hit him with the golf club that French was still playing with. But French was a big man, maybe a tough man, and I think

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the man who came out of the shower room was afraid of him. At the last minute, he thought of something that would be useful in his hand if there were a fight. That was the flashlight cell Tom Chester carried in his pocket."

I held out my hand. "Give it to me."

Tom Chester reached into his coat pocket and handed it over. I said, "You all knew he had it. You had all seen him working his fingers on it for weeks to strengthen his grip. His coat hung in his open locker. The man who killed French took it out of the coat as he passed and had it in his fist. I don't know what he said to French, or French's reply, but French was slugged — like this."

I was standing opposite the end of the steel lockers. I wrapped my hand tight around the heavy little battery and swung hard, being careful that all four knuckles hit square on. It didn't hurt as much as I had expected. The steel plate of the locker bent like tin.

Lila Garrett closed her eyes. Her grip tightened on Pat's arm. The three men were as poker-faced as ever.

"It broke his jaw and slammed his head into the lockers," I said. "The man who hit him didn't hold the battery as tightly as I did. It flew out of his hand. French's body fell on top of it. The other man saw that he was dead. He didn't have time to recover the battery because he knew Charlie would be back soon. He was naked, still wet from his shower. He ran back to the shower room and was there with the others when Charlie came in and found the body."

There was a long silence. When the sheriff spoke, the words sounded as if he were wrenching them out of his guts.

"Which one?"

"I'm not sure. It will be hard to prove. If either of the others saw him, they aren't talking and I don't think you can make them talk. But all three are natural suspects. When the story gets out, everybody's reputation will go to hell. The gossips will have it that the three of them ganged up on French and beat him to death because there was really something going on between him and Mrs. Garrett. As long as the true story never comes out, they'll make what they want to make out of it. On the other hand, if somebody confesses, the talk will stop after it's been kicked around for a while. The killer will be tried by a friendly jury, because French was an outsider and the others are hometown boys. A good lawyer can get him off with manslaughter or third-degree murder. He'll be out in three or four years. By that time —"

Tom Chester lifted his hand to stop me.

"That's enough," he said. "You guessed it right except I wasn't afraid of him. I —"

"I guessed everything right, kid," I interrupted, loudly.

He was still looking at me with his mouth open when his sister said, "Tom!" and fainted.

I was right about the jury. Tom

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drew one-to-ten for third-degree murder and served three years and six months, a year less than the bank embezzler got for grand larceny. His sister testified that French had made a couple of serious passes at her while Pat was away. She hadn't mentioned it to her husband, because she didn't want to stir up trouble between him and his boss, but she told her brother. The defense attorney made a strong point of the fact that French outweighed Tom Chester by 30 pounds, and argued that a little thing like a flashlight cell snatched up in a moment of fear by a boy avenging his sister's honor could not be called a murder weapon.

Tom had enough sense not to talk too much. "Snatched up in a moment of fear" was the defense attorney's expression. He hung his whole case on what he claimed was a clearly established lack of premeditation, and the jury believed him well enough to keep Tom out of the gas box.

I guess none of the jurors had ever played golf because any dud can tell you there is nothing the matter with the grip of your right hand if you hook. When a man carries something that can be just as nasty as a length of gas pipe in his coat pocket — his right-hand coat pocket — for a month or six weeks, wrapping his hand around it every few minutes and feeling the solid, deadly lump it makes in his fist, it's hard to say exactly what he has in mind. But he isn't thinking about his golf game.

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THE THREE HORSEMEN

by G. K. CHESTERTON

THE CURIOUS AND SOMETIMES creepy effect which Mr. Pond produced upon me, despite his commonplace courtesy and dapper decorum, was possibly connected with some memories of childhood and the vague verbal association of his name. He was a government official who was an old friend of my father's, and I fancy my infantile imagination had somehow mixed up the name of Mr. Pond with the pond in the garden.

When one came to think of it, he was curiously like the pond in the garden. He was so quiet at all normal times, so neat in shape and so shiny, so to speak, in his ordinary reflections of earth and sky and the common daylight. And yet I knew there were some queer things in the pond in the garden. Once in a hundred times, on one or two days during the whole year, the pond would look oddly different; or there would come a flitting shadow or a flash in its flat serenity, and a fish or a frog or some more grotesque creature would show itself to the sky. And I knew there were monsters in Mr. Pond also — monsters in his mind which rose only for a moment to the surface and sank again. They took the form of monstrous remarks, in the middle of all his mild and rational remarks. Some people thought he had suddenly gone mad in the midst of his sanest conversation. But even they had to admit that he must have suddenly gone sane again.

Perhaps again, this foolish fantasy was fixed in the youthful mind because, at certain moments, Mr. Pond looked rather like a fish himself. His manners were not only quite polite but quite conventional; his very gestures were conventional, with the exception of one occasional trick of plucking at his pointed beard, which seemed to come on him chiefly when he was at last forced to be serious about one of his strange and random statements. At such moments he would stare owlishly in front of him and pull his beard, which had a comic effect of pulling his mouth open, as if it were the mouth of a puppet with hairs for wires. This odd occasional opening and shutting of his mouth, without speech, had quite a startling similarity to the slow gaping and gulping of a fish. But it never lasted for more than a few seconds, during which, I suppose, he swallowed the unwelcome proposal of explaining what on earth he meant.

He was talking quite quietly one day to Sir Hubert Wotton, the well-known diplomatist; they were seated under gayly striped tents or giant parasols in our own garden, and gazing towards the pond which I had perversely associated with him. They happened to be talking about a part

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of the world that both of them knew well, and very few people in Western Europe know at all — the vast flats fading into fens and swamps that stretch across Pomerania and Poland and Russia and the rest; right away, for all I know, into the Siberian deserts. And Mr. Pond recalled that across a region where the swamps are deepest and intersected by pools and sluggish rivers, there runs a single road raised on a high causeway, with steep and sloping sides; a straight path, safe enough for the ordinary pedestrian, but barely broad enough for two horsemen to ride abreast. That is the beginning of the story.

It concerned a time not so very long ago, but a time in which horsemen were still used much more than they are at present, though already rather less as fighters than as couriers. Suffice it to say that it was in one of the many wars that have laid waste that part of the world — in so far as it is possible to lay waste such a wilderness. Inevitably it involved the pressure of the Prussian system on the nation of the Poles, but beyond that it is not necessary to expound the politics of the matter, or discuss its rights and wrongs here. Let us merely say more lightly that Mr. Pond amused the company with a riddle.

"I expect you remember hearing," said Pond, "of all the excitement there was about Paul Petrowski, the poet from Cracow, who did two things rather dangerous in those days: moving from Cracow and going to live in Posnań, and trying to combine being a poet with being a patriot. The town he was living in was held at the moment by the Prussians. It was situated exactly at the eastern end of the long causeway, the Prussian command having naturally taken care to hold the bridgehead of such a solitary bridge across such a sea of swamps. But their base for that particular operation was at the western end of the causeway. The celebrated Marshal Von Grock was in general command; and, as it happened, his own old regiment, which was still his favorite regiment, the White Hussars, was posted nearest to the beginning of the great embanked road.

"Of course everything was spick-and-span, down to every detail of the wonderful white uniforms, with the flame-colored baldrick slung across them; for this was just before the universal use of colors like mud and clay for all the uniforms in the world. I don't blame them for that; I sometimes feel the old epoch of heraldry was a finer thing than all that epoch of imitative coloring that came in with natural history and the worship of chameleons and beetles. Anyhow, this crack regiment of cavalry in the Prussian service still wore its own uniform; and, as you will see, that was another element in the fiasco. But it wasn't only the uniforms; it was the uniformity. The whole thing went wrong because the discipline was too good. Grock's soldiers obeyed him too well; so he simply couldn't do a thing he wanted."

"I suppose that's a paradox," said

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Wotton, heaving a sigh. "Of course it's very clever and all that; but really, it's all nonsense, isn't it? Oh, I know people say in a general way that there's too much discipline in the German army. But you can't have too much discipline in an army."

"But I don't say it in a general way," said Pond plaintively. "I say it in a particular way, about this particular case. Grock failed because his soldiers obeyed him. Of course, if *one* of his soldiers had obeyed him, it wouldn't have been so bad. But when *two* of his soldiers obeyed him — why, really, the poor old devil had no chance."

Wotton laughed in a guttural fashion. "I'm glad to hear your new military theory. You'd allow one soldier in a regiment to obey orders; but two soldiers obeying orders strikes you as carrying Prussian discipline a bit too far."

"I haven't got any military theory. I'm talking about a military fact," replied Mr. Pond placidly. "It is a military fact that Grock failed because two of his soldiers obeyed him. It is a military fact that he might have succeeded if one of them had disobeyed him. You can make up what theories you like about it afterwards."

"I don't go in much for theories, myself," said Wotton rather stiffly, as if he had been touched by a trivial insult.

At this moment could be seen striding across the sun-checkered lawn the large and swaggering figure of Captain Gahagan, the highly incongruous friend and admirer of little Mr. Pond. He had a flaming flower in his buttonhole and a gray top hat slightly slanted upon his ginger-haired head; and he walked with a swagger that seemed to come out of an older period of dandies and duellists, though he himself was comparatively young. So long as his tall-broad-shouldered figure was merely framed against the sunlight, he looked like the embodiment of all arrogance. When he came and sat down, with the sun on his face, there was a sudden contradiction of all this in very soft brown eyes, which looked sad and even a little anxious.

Mr. Pond, interrupting his monologue, was almost in a twitter of apologies.

"I'm afraid I'm talking too much, as usual; the truth is I was talking about that poet Petrowski, who was nearly executed in Poznań — quite a long time ago. The military authorities on the spot hesitated and were going to let him go, unless they had direct orders from Marshal Von Grock or higher. But Marshal Von Grock was quite determined on the poet's death, and sent orders for his execution that very evening. A reprieve was sent afterwards to save him; but as the man carrying the reprieve died on the way, the prisoner was released after all."

"But as —" repeated Wotton mechanically.

"The man carrying the *reprieve*," added Gahagan somewhat sarcastically.

"Died on the way," muttered

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Wotton softly and quite seriously.

"Why, then of course the prisoner was released," observed Gahagan in a loud and cheerful voice. "All as clear as clear can be. Tell us another of those stories, Grandpapa."

"It's a perfectly true story," protested Pond, "and it happened exactly as I say. It isn't any paradox or anything like that. Only, of course, you have to know the story to see how simple it is."

"Yes," agreed Gahagan. "I think I should have to know the story before realizing how simple it is."

"Better tell us the story and have done with it," said Wotton shortly.

The talk had begun upon Steel Helmets and Storm Troops and the Hitler Revolution, or at least one element in that revolution.

"It's only one yellow patch of Prussia, really; but the patch spreads," said Mr. Pond. "You think it odd there should be all that anarchy about discipline. But all that discipline is anarchy. A servile fear is its only faith; and it's as disobedient as a slave."

"Here, stop a minute," said Wotton, frowning; "you go rather too fast for me." And so, by way of explanation, Pond told Petrowski's story.

Paul Petrowski was one of those utterly unpractical men who are of prodigious importance in practical politics. His power lay in the fact that he was a national poet but an international singer. That is, he happened to have a very fine and powerful voice, with which he sang his own patriotic songs in half the concert halls of the world.

At home, of course, he was a torch and trumpet of revolutionary hopes, especially now, in the sort of international crisis in which practical politicians disappear and their places are taken by men either more or less practical than themselves. For the true idealist and the real realist have at least the love of action in common. And the practical politician thrives by offering practical objections to any action. What the idealist does may be unworkable, and what the man of action does may be unscrupulous; but in neither trade can a man win a reputation by doing nothing. It is odd that these two extreme types stood at the two extreme ends of that one ridge and road among the marshes: the Polish poet a prisoner in the town at one end, the Prussian soldier a commander in the camp at the other.

For Marshal Von Grock was a true Prussian, not only entirely practical but entirely prosaic. He had never read a line of poetry himself; but he was no fool. He had the sense of reality which belongs to soldiers; and it prevented him from falling into the asinine errors of the practical politician. He did not scoff at visions; he only hated them. He knew that a poet or a prophet could be as dangerous as an army. And he was resolved that the poet should die. It was his one compliment to poetry; and it was sincere.

He was at the moment sitting at a table in his tent; the spiked helmet

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that he always wore in public was lying in front of him; and his massive head looked quite bald though it was only closely shaven. His whole face was also shaven and had no covering but a pair of very strong spectacles, which alone gave an enigmatic look to his heavy and sagging visage. He turned to a lieutenant standing by — a German of the pale-haired and rather pudding-faced variety, whose blue saucer eyes were staring vacantly.

"Lieutenant Von Hocheimer," he said, "did you say His Highness would reach the camp tonight?"

"7:45, Marshal," replied the lieutenant, who seemed rather reluctant to speak at all, like a large animal learning a new trick of talking.

"Then there is just time," said Grock, "to send you with that order for execution before he arrives. We must serve His Highness in every way; but especially in saving him needless trouble. He will be occupied enough reviewing the troops; see that everything is placed at His Highness' disposal. He will be leaving again for the next outpost in an hour."

The large lieutenant seemed partially to come to life and made a shadowy salute.

"Of course, Marshal. We must all obey His Highness."

"I said we must all serve His Highness," said the Marshal.

With a sharper movement than usual he unhooked his heavy spectacles and rapped them down upon the table. If the pale blue eyes of the lieutenant could have seen anything of the sort, or if they could have opened any wider even if they had, they might as well have opened wide enough at the transformation made by the gesture. It was like the removal of an iron mask. An instant before, Marshal Von Grock had looked uncommonly like a rhinoceros, with his heavy folds of leathery cheek and jaw. Now he was a new kind of monster — a rhinoceros with the eyes of an eagle. The bleak blaze of his old eyes would have told almost anybody that he had something within that was not merely heavy. At least that there was a part of him made of steel and not only of iron. For all men live by a spirit, though it were an evil spirit, or one so strange to the commonalty of Christian men that they hardly know if it be good or evil.

"I said we must all serve His Highness," repeated Grock. "I will speak more plainly, and say we must all save His Highness. Is it not enough for our kings that they should be our gods? Is it not enough for them to be served and saved? It is we who must do the serving and saving."

Marshal Von Grock seldom talked, or even thought, as more theoretical people would count thinking. And it will generally be found that men of his type, when they do happen to think aloud, very much prefer to talk to the dog. They have even a certain patronizing relish in using long words and elaborate arguments before the dog. It would be unjust to compare Lieutenant Von Hocheimer to a dog.

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It would be unjust to the dog, who is a much more sensitive and vigilant creature. It would be truer to say that Grock, in one of his rare moments of reflection, had the comfort and safety of feeling that he was reflecting aloud in the presence of a cow or a cabbage.

"Again and again, in the history of our royal house, the servant has saved the master," went on Grock, "and often got little but kicks for it, from the outer world at least, which always whines sentimentalism against the successful and the strong. But at least we were successful and we were strong. They cursed Bismarck for deceiving even his own master over the Ems telegram; but it made that master the master of the world. Paris was taken; Austria dethroned; and we were safe. Tonight Paul Petrowski will be dead and we shall again be safe. That is why I am sending you with his death warrant at once. You understand that you are bearing the order for Petrowski's instant execution and that you must remain to see it obeyed?"

The inarticulate Hocheimer saluted; he could understand that all right. And he had some qualities of a dog after all: he was as brave as a bulldog, and he could be faithful to the death.

"You must mount and ride at once," went on Grock, "and see that nothing delays or thwarts you. I know for a fact that fool Arnheim is going to release Petrowski tonight, if no message comes. Make all speed."

And the lieutenant again saluted and went out into the night; and mounting one of the superb white chargers that were part of the splendor of that splendid corps, began to ride along the high, narrow road along the ridge, almost like the top of a wall, which overlooked the dark horizon, the dim patterns and decaying colors of those mighty marshes.

Almost as the last echoes of his horse's hoofs died away along the causeway, Von Grock rose and put on his helmet and his spectacles and came to the door of his tent; but for another reason. The chief men of his staff, in full dress, were already approaching him; and all along the more distant lines there were the sounds of ritual salutation and the shouting of orders. His Highness the Prince had come.

His Highness the Prince was something of a contrast, at least in externals, to the men around him; and even in other things something of an exception in his world. He also wore a spiked helmet, but that of another regiment, black with glints of blue steel; and there was something half incongruous and half imaginatively appropriate, in some antiquated way, in the combination of that helmet with the long, dark, flowing beard, amid all those shaven Prussians. As if in keeping with the long, dark, flowing beard, he wore a long, dark, flowing cloak, blue with one blazing star on it of the highest royal order; and under the blue cloak he wore a black uniform. Though as German as any man, he was a very different kind of German; and something in his proud but abstracted face was consonant

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with the legend that the one true passion of his life was music.

In truth, the grumbling Grock was inclined to connect with that remote eccentricity the, to him, highly irritating and exasperating fact that the Prince did not immediately proceed to the proper review and reception by the troops, already drawn out in all the labyrinthine parade of the military etiquette of their nation. But he plunged at once impatiently into the subject which Grock most desired to see left alone — the subject of this infernal Pole, his popularity and his peril; for the Prince had heard some of the man's songs sung in half the opera houses of Europe.

"To talk of executing a man like that is madness," said the Prince, scowling. "He is not a common Pole. He is a European institution. He would be deplored and deified by our Allies, by our friends, even by our fellow Germans. Do you want to be the mad women who murdered Orpheus?"

"Highness," said the Marshal, "he would be deplored; but he would be dead. He would be deified; but he would be dead. Whatever he means to do, he would never do it. Whatever he is doing he would do no more. Death is the fact of all facts; and I am rather fond of facts."

"Do you know nothing of the world?" demanded the Prince.

"I care nothing for the world," answered Grock, "beyond the last black and white post of the Fatherland."

"God in heaven," cried His Highness. "You would have hanged Goethe for a quarrel with Weimar."

"For the safety of your royal house," answered Grock, "without one instant's hesitation."

There was a short silence and the Prince said sharply and suddenly: "What does this mean?"

"It means that I had not an instant's hesitation," replied the Marshal steadily. "I have already myself sent orders for the execution of Petrowski."

The Prince rose like a great dark eagle, the swirl of his cloak like the sweep of mighty wings; and all men knew that a wrath beyond mere speech had made him a man of action. He did not even speak to Von Grock; but talking across him, at the top of his voice, called out to the second in command, General Von Voglen, a stocky man with a square head, who had stood in the background as motionless as a stone.

"Who has the best horse in your cavalry division, General? Who is the best rider?"

"Arnold Von Schacht has a horse that might beat a race horse," replied the general. "And he rides it as well as a jockey. He is one of the White Hussars."

"Very well," said the Prince, with the same new ring in his voice. "Let him ride at once after the man with this mad message and stop him. I will give him authority; which I think the distinguished Marshal will not dispute. Bring me pen and ink."

He sat down, shaking out the cloak, and they brought him writing ma-

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terials; and he wrote firmly and with a flourish the order, overriding all other orders, for the reprieve and release of Petrowski the Pole.

Then amid a dead silence, in the midst of which old Grock stood with an unblinking stare like a stone idol of prehistoric times, he swept out of the room, trailing his mantle and saber. He was so violently displeased that no man dared to remind him of the formal reviewing of the troops. Arnold Von Schacht, a curly-haired, active youth, looking more like a boy, but wearing more than one medal on the white uniform of the Hussars, clicked his heels and received the folded paper from the Prince. Then, striding out, he sprang on his horse and flew along the high, narrow road like a silver arrow or a shooting star.

The old Marshal went back slowly and calmly to his tent, slowly and calmly removed his spiked helmet and his spectacles, and laid them on the table as before. Then he called out to an orderly just outside the tent and bade him fetch Sergeant Schwarz of the White Hussars immediately.

A minute later there presented himself before the Marshal a gaunt and wiry man with a great scar across his jaw; rather dark for a German, unless all his colors had been changed by years of smoke and storm and bad weather. He saluted and stood stiffly at attention, as the Marshal slowly raised his eyes to him. And vast as was the abyss between the Imperial Marshal, with generals under him, and that one battered noncommissioned officer, it is true that of all the men who have talked in this tale these two men alone understood each other without words.

"Sergeant," said the Marshal curtly, "I have seen you twice before. Once, I think, when you won the prize of the whole army for marksmanship with the carbine."

The sergeant saluted and said nothing.

"And once again," went on Von Grock, "when you were questioned for shooting that damned old woman who would not give us information about the ambush. The incident caused considerable comment at the time, even in some of our own circles. Influence, however, was exerted on your side. My influence."

The sergeant saluted again and was still silent. The Marshal continued to speak in a colorless but curiously candid way:

"His Highness the Prince has been misinformed and deceived on a point essential to his own safety and that of the Fatherland. Under this error, he has rashly sent a reprieve to the Pole, Petrowski, who is to be executed tonight. I repeat: who is to be executed tonight. You must immediately ride after Von Schacht, who carries the reprieve, and stop him."

"I can hardly hope to overtake him, Marshal," said Sergeant Schwarz. "He has the swiftest horse in the regiment, and is the finest rider."

"I did not tell you to overtake him. I told you to stop him," said Grock. Then he spoke more slowly. "A man

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may often be stopped or recalled by various signals — by shouting or shooting." His voice dragged still more ponderously but without pause. "The discharge of a carbine might attract his attention."

And then the dark sergeant saluted for the third time, and his grim mouth was again shut tight.

"The world is changed," said Grock, "not by what is said or what is blamed or praised, but by what is done. The world never recovers from what is done. At this moment the killing of a man is a thing that must be done." He suddenly flashed his brilliant eyes of steel at the other and added: "I mean, of course, Petrowski."

And Sergeant Schwarz smiled still more grimly; and he also, lifting the flap of the tent, went out into the darkness and mounted his horse and rode.

The last of the three riders was even less likely than the first to indulge in imaginative ideas for their own sake. But because he also was in some imperfect manner human, he could not but feel, on such a night and on such an errand, the oppressiveness of that inhuman landscape.

While he rode along that one abrupt bridge, there spread out to infinity all around him something a myriad times more inhuman than the sea. For a man could not swim in it, nor sail boats on it, nor do anything human with it; he could only sink in it and practically without a struggle.

The sergeant felt vaguely the presence of some primordial slime that was neither solid nor liquid nor capable of any form; and he felt its presence behind the forms of all things. He was an atheist, like many thousands of dull, clever men in northern Germany; but he was not that happier sort of pagan who can see in human progress a natural flowering of the earth. That world before him was not a field in which green or living things evolved and developed and bore fruit; it was only an abyss in which all living things would sink forever as in a bottomless pit; and the thought hardened him for all the strange duties he had to do in so hateful a world. The gray-green blotches of flattened vegetation, seen from above like a sprawling map, seemed more like the chart of a disease than a development; and the landlocked pools might have been of poison rather than water. He remembered some humanitarian fuss or other about the poisoning of pools.

But the reflections of the sergeant, like most reflections of men not normally reflective, had a root in some subconscious strain on his nerves and his practical intelligence. The truth was that the straight road before him was not only dreary but seemed interminably long. He would never have believed he could have ridden so far without catching some distant glimpse of the man he followed. Von Schacht must indeed have the fleetest of horses to have got so far ahead already; for, after all, he had only started, at whatever speed, within a comparatively short time. As Schwarz had said, he hardly expected to overtake him; but

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a very realistic sense of the distances involved had told him that he must very soon come in sight of him. And then, just as despair was beginning to descend and spread itself vaguely over the desolate landscape, he saw him at last.

A white spot, which slightly, slowly, enlarged into something like a white figure, appeared far ahead, riding furiously. It enlarged to that extent because Schwarz managed a spurt of riding furiously himself; but it was large enough to show the faint streak of orange across the white uniform that marked the regiment of the Hussars. The winner of the prize for shooting in the whole army had hit the white of smaller targets than that.

He unslung his carbine; and a shock of unnatural noise shook up all the wild fowl for miles upon the silent marshes. But Sergeant Schwarz did not trouble about them. What interested him was that, even at such a distance, he could see the straight white figure turn crooked and alter in shape, as if the man had suddenly grown deformed. He was hanging like a humpback over the saddle; and Schwarz, with his exact eye and long experience, was certain that his victim was shot through the body, and almost certain that he was shot through the heart. Then he brought the horse down with a second shot; and the whole equestrian group heeled over and slipped and slid and vanished in one white flash into the dark fenland below.

The hard-headed sergeant was certain that his work was done. Hard-headed men of his sort are generally very precise about what they are doing; that is why they are so often quite wrong about what they do. He had outraged the comradeship that is the soul of armies; he had killed a gallant officer who was in the performance of his duty; he had deceived and defied his sovereign and committed a common murder without excuse of personal quarrel; but he had obeyed his superior officer and he had helped to kill a Pole.

These two last facts for the moment filled his mind; and he rode thoughtfully back again to make his report to Marshal Von Grock. He had no doubts about the thoroughness of the work he had done. The man carrying the reprieve was certainly dead; and even if by some miracle he were only dying, he could not conceivably have ridden his dead or dying horse to the town in time to prevent the execution. No; on the whole it was much more practical and prudent to get back under the wing of his protector, the author of the desperate project. With his whole strength he leaned on the strength of the great Marshal.

And truly the great Marshal had this greatness about him: that after the monstrous thing he had done, or caused to be done, he disdained to show any fear of facing the facts on the spot; or the compromising possibilities of keeping in touch with his tool. He and the sergeant, indeed, an hour or so later, actually rode along the ridge together, till they came to a particular place where the Marshal

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dismounted, but bade the other ride on. He wished the sergeant to go forward to the original goal of the riders and see if all was quiet in the town after the execution, or whether there remained some danger from popular resentment.

"Is it here then, Marshal?" asked the sergeant in a low voice. "I fancied it was farther on; but it's a fact the infernal road seemed to lengthen out like a nightmare."

"It is here," answered Grock; and swung himself heavily from saddle and stirrup, and then went to the edge of the long parapet and looked downward.

The moon had risen over the marshes and gone up, strengthening in splendor and gleaming on dark waters and green scum; and in the nearest clump of reeds, at the foot of the slope, there lay as in a sort of luminous and radiant ruin, all that was left of one of those superb white horses and white horsemen of his old brigade. Nor was the identity doubtful; the moon made a sort of aureole of the curled golden hair of young Arnold, the second rider and the bearer of the reprieve; and the same mystical moonshine glittered not only on baldrick and buttons, but on the special medals of the young soldier and the stripes and signs of his degree.

Under such a glamorous veil of light, he might almost have been in the white armor of Sir Galahad; and there could scarcely have been a more horrible contrast than that between such fallen grace and youth below and the rocky and grotesque figure looking down from above.

Grock had taken off his helmet again; and though it is possible that this was the vague shadow of some funereal form of respect, its visible effect was that the queer, naked head and neck like that of a pachyderm glittered stonily in the moon, like the hairless head and neck of some monster of the Age of Stone. Rops, or some such etcher of the black, fantastic German schools, might have drawn such a picture of a huge beast as inhuman as a beetle looking down on the broken wings and white and golden armor of some defeated champion of the Cherubim.

Grock said no prayer and uttered no pity; but in some dark way his mind was moved; as even the dark and mighty swamp will sometimes move like a living thing; and as such men will, when feeling for the first time faintly on their defense before they know not what, he tried to formulate his only faith and confront with it the stark universe and the staring moon.

"After and before the deed the German Will is the same. It cannot be broken by changes and by time, like that of those others who repent. It stands outside time like a thing of stone, looking forward and backward with the same face."

The silence that followed lasted long enough to please his cold vanity with a certain sense of portent; as if a stone figure had spoken in a valley of silence. But the silence began to

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thrill once more with a distant whisper which was the faint throb of horse hoofs; and a moment later the sergeant came galloping or rather racing back along the uplifted road; and his scarred and swarthy visage was no longer merely grim but ghastly in the moon.

"Marshal," he said, saluting with a strange stiffness, "I have seen Petrowski the Pole."

"Haven't they buried him yet?" asked the Marshal, still staring down and in some abstraction.

"If they have," said Schwarz, "he has rolled the stone away and risen from the dead."

He stared in front of him at the moon and marshes. But indeed, though he was far from being a visionary character, it was not these things that he saw; but rather the things he had just seen. He had indeed seen Paul Petrowski walking alive and alert down the brilliantly illuminated main avenue of that Polish town to the very beginning of the causeway; there was no mistaking the slim figure with plumes of hair and tuft of Frenchified beard which figured in so many private albums and illustrated magazines. And behind him he had seen that Polish town aflame with flags and firebrands and a population boiling with triumphant hero worship; though perhaps less hostile to the government than it might have been, since it was rejoicing at the release of its popular hero.

"Do you mean," cried Grock with a sudden croaking stridency of voice, "that they have dared to release him in defiance of my message?"

Schwarz saluted again and said:

"They had already released him; and they have received no message."

"Do you ask me, after all this," said Grock, "to believe that no messenger came from our camp at all?"

"No messenger at all," said the sergeant.

There was a much longer silence and then Grock said hoarsely:

"What in the name of hell has happened? Can you think of anything to explain it all?"

"I have seen something," said the sergeant, "which I think explains it."

When Mr. Pond had told the story up to this point, he paused with an irritating blankness of expression.

"Well," said Gahagan impatiently, "and do *you* know anything that would explain it all?"

"Well, I think I do," said Mr. Pond meekly. "You see, I had to worry it out for myself, when the report came round to my apartment. It really did arise from an excess of Prussian obedience. It also arose from an excess of another Prussian weakness: contempt. And of all the passions that blind and madden and mislead men, the worst is the coldest — contempt.

"Grock had talked much too comfortably before the cow; and much too confidently before the cabbage. He despised stupid men even on his own staff; and treated Von Hocheimer, the first messenger, as a piece of furniture merely because he looked like a fool;

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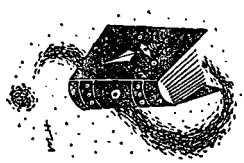
but he was not such a fool as he looked. He also understood what the great Marshal meant, quite as well as the cynical sergeant, who had done such dirty work all his life.

Von Hocheimer also understood the Marshal's peculiar moral philosophy: that an act is unanswerable even when it is indefensible. He knew that what his commander wanted was simply the corpse of Petrowski; that he wanted it anyhow, at the expense of any deception of princes or destruction of soldiers. And when he heard a swifter horseman behind him, riding to overtake him, he knew as well as Grock himself that the new messenger must be carrying with him the message of the mercy of the Prince.

"Von Schacht, that very young but very gallant officer, looking like the very embodiment of all that more generous tradition of Germany that has been too much neglected in this tale, was worthy of the accident that made him the herald of a more generous policy. He came with the speed of that noble horsemanship that has left behind it in Europe the very name of chivalry, calling out to the other in a tone like a herald's trumpet to stop and stand and turn. And Von Hocheimer obeyed. He stopped; he reined in his horse; he turned in his saddle; but his hand held the carbine leveled like a pistol, and he shot the boy between the eyes.

"Then he turned again and rode on, carrying the death warrant of the Pole. Behind him horse and man had crashed over the edge of the embankment; so that the whole road was clear. And along that clear and open road toiled in his turn the third messenger, marveling at the interminable length of his journey; till he saw at last the unmistakable uniform of a Hussar like a white star disappearing in the distance and he shot also. Only he did not kill the second messenger, but the first.

"That was why no messenger came alive to the Polish town that night. That was why the prisoner walked out of his prison alive. Do you think I was quite wrong in saying that Von Grock had two faithful servants; and one too many?"



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We are deeply grateful to Mrs. Roy E. Renwick of Powell, Ohio, for calling this amusing piece to our attention and for supplying the text. If you have a favorite story you would like to see reprinted, by all means let us know. Merely send us the title of the story and the name of the author — and, if possible, the original source — and we promise to track down the story even if it takes us to the ends of the (publishing) world . . .

'TEC'S TWILIGHT

by R. G. G. PRICE

I DO NOT OFTEN GET CALLED IN nowadays. The educational standards of the police have been pushed up so much that they can cope with even the most *outré* crimes, and when they want outside help they turn to M.I.5 or a psychiatrist. The poor old private investigator is lucky if he gets an overseas assignment, paid in blocked currency. As I sit here mumbling over my newspaper clippings, I feel rather bitter, until the memory of my heyday brings a sparkle to my eye, a bloom to my cheeks, and a monologue to my lips.

What a heyday it was! I actually refused cases. Sometimes, in a patronizing way, I passed on callers to my rivals. Often after a preliminary interview in Baker Street they would come back and offer me double fees to take the case. I just laughed; I never worked for less than triple fees. I liked to talk to these would-be clients, to raise their hopes, then dash them. I picked up quite a lot about the other members of the profession in this way. Hercule Poirot, courteously addressed in French, would reply approximately in English. Lord Peter Wimsey posed about not being in the game for money and then suggested an armful of first editions as an honorarium. Philip Trent was flippant, Dr. Gideon Fell's breathing was so loud it put clients off, and Father Brown gave a good deal of unsolicited spiritual counsel.

Unlike most of the others, I had an efficient organization behind me. I had a staff trained in shadowing. I kept accounts. I sent calendars to old clients at Christmas. My advertisements brought me more business in a week than Sherlock Holmes got in a year. I often used to tell him to try a sandwichman or two. He just turned his nose up; he could never keep it aquiline when annoyed. I never carried a stooge on the strength. Many of the others lost trade when clients saw the kind of people they associated with. Watson, Hastings, Jervis, —

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what a crew! How on earth did they pick them? I sometimes wondered whether they weren't crooks using stupidity as a cover. Once the big chief had pigeon-holed them as nit-wits they could have got away with anything. Holmes would never have believed his dear Watson was leading him up the garden. Why, he could even have been Professor Moriarty.

The etiquette was pretty strict in this heyday of mine. If a rival got on the scene first, one never pushed in, though there was nothing against hanging about and waiting for him to make mistakes. But then it might be too late. It was dreadful seeing a case messed up and having to remain mute. Part of the trouble was that clients would often get in the wrong kind of man. I remember a nice little case at Hounslow. A collector of Annamese jade used to sleep in an Egyptian sarcophagus. One night someone shut the lid on him and stood a Balinese buddha on top. Then the murderer set the pianola playing Schönberg, turned a Braque face to the wall, and left a volume of Donne open on a buhl cabinet. For some reason I cannot remember the floor was covered with snow and there were no footmarks. What did the corpse's secretary do but send for Bulldog Drummond! It was pathetic to watch the poor chap.

What a case like that needed was an atmospheric detective. We learned a lot about atmosphere from the Americans. Philo Vance and Ellery Queen would stand in the murder room for hours, just sniffing up atmosphere. Once Philo Vance and Sam Spade were engaged jointly — that was in the days when Philip Marlowe was a pupil of Spade's — and there were terrible rows because Spade not only wouldn't sniff the atmosphere but he heavily overlaid it with an atmosphere he had brought with him. In England, Father Brown was very good on some kinds, though a Low Church atmosphere always put him off; he never mastered it. Father Brown's fault was that he could never solve a case that looked simple and was. Once one of his parishioners at Cobhole got tired of being nagged by his wife and bashed her with a niblick. Father Brown spent days on the case, but he never got farther than working out that a man who used a niblick for an iron shot was so perverse that he radiated spiritual evil. It was not a case that would have stood up in court. The family called me in and I solved it with fingerprints.

Relations with the police improved as they learned their job and got less sensitive. Inspectors Gregson and Lestrade were defeated before they began, and this made them bumptious or surly; but Inspector French, in the next generation, was good at his job and always got his man, unless Reggie Fortune did the post-mortem and complicated things. French was a restless kind of chap, always cycling after weak points in alibis or taking slow trains. That's why he never got on with Dr. Fell: he found him static. I

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see that young Inspector Appleby has risen to Assistant Commissioner and been knighted. Under Lestrade he would never have got off the beat, nor would Inspector Roderick Alleyn. Lestrade had no use for erudition or suavity. Once a man got "suave" on his report he was done for.

One of my best cases was a bank robbery. The police arrested the chief cashier, which upset the routine of the branch, and I was called in to provide an alternative criminal. I knew a leading bank robber was living on his previous coup in the chambers next to Lord Peter Wimsey's in Albany. I would watch Hank go out and then potter up with my skeleton keys; but Lord Peter used to pull me in to listen to Bach. Worse still, he would read Italian poetry or make me watch Bunter do conjuring tricks. Finally I got Albert Campion in to help, and while I was dealing with the evidence next door Campion was swapping genealogies with Wimsey or looking vacuous at him, which always roused Wimsey's pride. Both their jaws used to ache terribly after an evening of making them recede competitively.

I sometimes long to get back into the hurly-burly, even if the only way to do it is to give up my independence. I asked Tommy Hambledon the other day whether there was a job for me in the Secret Service. He was very kind, but he pointed out that my eccentricities might prevent my being accepted by the German public as a high-ranking Nazi, and without them . . . well, I should find it difficult to think of even the simplest trap or stratagem without them. The chap I saw in the room behind a news-agent's in Islington was very kind; but he could have passed unnoticed in a crowd. He belonged to the new type. My goatee, tattoo-marks, snuff-taking, and fur-lined cape are out of date now, and the Foreign Office have some kind of prejudice against employing agents who never move a step without a puma called Panther Rye.

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WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

John F. Suter's "A Break in the Film" is notable for its simple sincerity. It is a down-to-earth story, as real as they come, and full of deep nostalgia. The author is in his late thirties, has been happily married for fifteen years, and has three children who do their best to run the Suter household — and do. Originally, Mr. Suter was a Pennsylvania Dutchman from Lancaster, but he has lived in West Virginia since he was ten years old — long enough to say, "I suppose people would think I am more of a hillbilly than anything else."

His hobbies are interesting, and they reveal the man: sporadically he indulges in photography (and once won a national contest); he bowls on his nights out; he is a member of the National Speleological Society ("cave-crawlers, in plain English"); and he has a growing interest in archeology — "there is an exasperating puzzle in this field perched on top of a mountain only 30 miles from my home — a real-life case which I hope to crack some day in collaboration with friends."

Now, about Mr. Suter's story and how it was born: the author says simply, "I just took one deep dive into the past and let the story come out as it would. I started recalling a couple of old movie houses I used to attend as a kid, and the flood-gates of memory opened — the old titles, the old serials, the old comedies, how the places smelled — all of it came rushing back, and I realized that no one ever put them into a story . . . It's amazing how much kids who don't hear can remember!"

Writers are supposed to be extraordinarily observant, and that is probably true. But in the last analysis it is what happens to the writers themselves that makes the best, the most authentic material for tale-spinning — especially what happens inside of them — inside their heads and hearts . . .

A BREAK IN THE FILM

by JOHN F. SUTER

MY FAMILY MOVED AWAY FROM that town while I was still a kid. That was 25 years ago, and I've only been back once or twice since then. The place has changed, and I don't much care about going back, even if at the time it did just about kill me to have to leave there.

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Sometimes I wonder about change. Old Time itself is the main thing, I guess. Time and death. Slow death and sudden death.

I don't want to go back, mostly because of the old Graphic Theater. Not that the Graphic made the town. Most of the town would have ignored the Graphic if it had been able to.

Every town has — or has had — a movie house like the Graphic. There's one right here, only instead of naming it Hippodrome or Grand or Bijou, they simply call it the Travers after the fellow who happens to own it.

You know what it's like: certainly not anything like a first-run or even like the best "neighborhoods." Strictly one cut above a dump. Nowadays there are carpets on the floors, and lights on the walls, and the seats have some stuffing (they're not plain hard wood, the way they used to be), but these places are all basically the same.

This was the Graphic, back when I was a kid: About the size of a large independent grocery store, but not so big as a supermarket. Hard seats, no wall lights, no carpets. So dark inside it hurt your eyes to come out into the street, especially because there wasn't any lobby. You paid your ten cents to Bessie Hawes in the little cubbyhole by the front door, she tore off a ticket and dropped it into a can, and you went in. The screen was on the front wall, and you walked past it and Joe Stockton, the piano player, and found yourself a seat in the gradually rising amphitheater. Up at the rear there was a booth that doubled in brass: half was the projection room, the other half an office.

I was about nine when I started going to shows at the Graphic, and it was a battle to get started.

"I don't know whether I ought to let you go to that place or not," said Mom, staring at me as though she thought there was more to this than just my wanting to see a movie.

"Practically all the other kids go. Tommy Stewart does. If he goes, it's all right, ain't it?"

"*Isn't* it. Well, now — It's just that I've always heard it was such a dirty place. And you can't tell what might happen there."

But back in those days everybody in town knew everybody else's business, and they couldn't find anything to say against George and Bessie Hawes. Not then, anyway. And since George and Bessie ran the show, and since I kept at Mom, she finally gave in to me and I started going every Saturday.

If you went to the Graphic much, you met two people for sure, and maybe a third. Bessie Hawes you couldn't help meeting; she was always selling tickets. Bessie looked sort of middle-aged to me then, but I guess she was only somewhere between 25 and 30. One of the first women I ever saw with short hair — short, red hair that stood out ever so slightly from her head. Just a touch of powder and a suspicion of rouge, but enough

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to make her one of the town's first flappers. Lipstick, too, of course. And she enjoyed life. Don't see how she could have, stuck in that ticket office till all hours, but she always had a smile for you. Always.

Maybe what I remember most about the old Graphic is the front of it. Six-foot bills on each side of the building, with some kind of violent action going on in primary colors. Overhead, another big bill hanging, a square one, with more action screaming from it. William S. Hart in *Wagon Tracks*. Or Jack Mulhall in *The Social Buccaneer*. Or Art Acord, Antonio Moreno, Hoot Gibson, that crew. And there in that little ticket cubbyhole was Bessie Hawes, smiling. I remember that big poster flapping in the wind over Bessie's smile.

Joe Stockton, the piano player, was another one practically everybody knew. It was mostly because of his playing, I'm sure. Even in some of the better movie houses across the street, the organists sometimes fumbled it and were out of step with the film. Not Joe. He was always in there with something light during the comedies, like *Yes, We Have No Bananas*, *It Ain't Gonna Rain No More*, or *Barney Google*, and he really bore down on it for the westerns and serials. You hear all kinds of piano nowadays — boogie woogie, sweet and sentimental, honky-tonk — but the kind I'd like to hear again is movie-house piano. With Joe Stockton playing it.

Saturday mornings, before the show opened at ten, Joe used to stand out front, and a lot of us kids would hang around and fuss over him. At the time, I thought Joe was a good guy being nice to us. Since then, I'm not so sure. Joe was only of average build, but he had pretty, almost white, blonde hair and a complexion like an old-fashioned rose. I wonder if he didn't stand out there for the women to look him over. A gang of hero-worshipping kids wouldn't have hurt him a bit. And there was talk that he was quite a man with the ladies.

Joe dressed well, too, for a piano player. The styles changed fast in those days, but he kept right with them. Always up to the minute. I seem to remember a cigarette case, and that was in the days when most men either carried the pack plain or rolled their own. George Hawes remarked on Joe's clothes one day as he passed on his way to get the show started. "You must put all the money I give you on your back, Joe," he said, grinning. And because it was none of George's business, and Joe knew George knew it, Joe just smiled and shrugged. Then Bessie looked up from counting out piles of change and tacked on a postscript: "Joe'll amount to something someday. Anybody can see that. Won't you, Joe?"

I have always liked to find out how different machines work, and it wasn't long after I got to going to the Graphic that I decided to find

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out how the projector operated. So one Saturday I slipped up to the rear of the theater, nearly killing myself in the dark, and poked my head into the projection room. It wasn't much bigger than a Pullman washroom. Just room enough for the two projectors, a small work table with a home-made splicing outfit and rewind reels, and George Hawes.

George looked down his long nose at me, but he didn't have a mean expression in his eye. All he said was, "It'll cost you an extra dime to see this part of the show." When I pulled out the dime, he laughed and said to put it back in my pocket and come on in, if I could find some place to squeeze myself.

Hardly anybody got to know George. They never saw him long enough. It was his theater, but he was up in the projection room all during the show, and in his little cheesebox office next to it before the show started. After the last showing at night, he stuck around to sweep up the candy papers, and sometimes he mopped the floors with soap and water and carbolic. Bessie helped once in a while, but usually she left at close-up time to go home and get to bed early, she said.

George was a pretty nice guy. Not good-looking, but appealing. He had a long face — long in all dimensions — and his light brown hair wanted to soar off the back of his head as far as his face went down in front, even though his hair always seemed fresh-cut. A thin brown mustache gave him some distinction.

I learned about the machines fast, because he was entranced by them himself. I found out how to thread the film, how much loop to leave so there was no tautening and snapping, how and when to strike an arc with the carbons, how to splice and get the show going again after a break. All that I learned because George was delighted that somebody else wanted to know. He loved the movies and everything about them.

Finally he said, "You're a big help to me, Jeff. I feel I can step out of here once in a while without worrying. Can't stay in here all day, you know. Tell you what: You come around anytime you want to and Bessie'll let you in free. Only thing I ask is, don't make this place a hangout. You're welcome company, but your folks won't thank me if you're down here more than you're at home."

The bargain stuck. If Mom and Dad ever got ideas about not liking what I was up to, they never let on. I guess nothing bad ever rubbed off George Hawes onto me. I don't think there was any bad to rub off.

As I say, George loved movies. At least he loved westerns, action pictures, serials and comedies. The sticky and the complicated stuff was not for him. Keep it across the street in the other houses, was his philosophy. His favorite was comedies. He always doled out generous helpings of Our Gang, Harold Lloyd, the chimpanzee Joe Martin, Felix the Cat cartoons, Ben Turpin, Harry

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Langdon, the Al Christie comedies (with the bone figures under the dialogue), the Hal Roach productions, Mack Sennett's stuff — all that. The titles alone would double him up, especially the take-offs on the more serious shows: *Donkey, Son of Burro; Riders of the Kitchen Range; The Three Must Get Theirs.* They were funnier to me because George found them funny.

Early in the summer of the year when we moved from town, I was watching a William Duncan serial through one of the portholes of the projection room. The machine was whirring away, and Joe Stockton was giving the piano a good working-over, so I didn't hear anything at first.

Somebody said, "Mr. Hawes?"

I looked around. The door was open, and I saw a pudgy, dark-haired man standing in the doorway. I pegged him for a businessman by his stiff white detachable collar and cuffs. At that time soft shirts had only taken with workingmen and sports.

George squinted around the back of the projector. "Yes?"

"My name's Hurst. Could I see you in private? I have some business to talk about."

George glanced at me. "Jeff's not a licensed operator, so I can't — Oh, well, he's good enough, sure he is. Jeff, can you take her for a bit while this gentleman and I go into the office?"

I nodded.

"All right." He stepped around to the door and I squeezed around to the right of the projector. The reel in it had just started. "Anything goes wrong, you knock on the wall."

Just before it was time to switch to the other machine George came back, alone.

"That," he said as he checked my threading on the new reel, "was an offer to buy this place."

I doubted I'd like this Hurst as well as I did George, just from the little I'd seen. I said, "You going to sell?"

He didn't answer until the new reel had started and he was cranking on the rewind. "You don't make up your mind that quick, Jeff, on things like this. Right now, I doubt it. He wants to put in a cut-rate men's clothing store, he says. There's enough of them in town, and not enough entertainment." He slowed his cranking for a moment. "It was a good offer, though. Maybe too good."

I asked him what he meant, but all he said was, "If you'd seen as many pictures as I have, you'd know that somebody who offers you more than a thing's worth is up to something."

I couldn't argue with him. He had the voice of authority. I went home not long after that.

The next week, when I went up to the ticket window to get Bessie to pass me in, she looked up and said, "Oh, Jeff. I want to talk to you. Let the rest of them go in first. D'you mind?"

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I hung around until I was the last one. She motioned me over and put her face close to the hole in the glass.

"I want you to do something for me, Jeff," she said, low and sort of excited. "George has a chance to sell this place and make a lot of money. But he doesn't want to do it. I've tried to talk him into it and he won't listen to me. He might pay some attention if somebody else said the same thing. He likes you, Jeff. He might make up his mind if you talked to him. Would you, Jeff?"

Wouldn't listen to Bessie? I looked at her and, even in the early summer heat, she looked a picture. If I were only a little older —

She was saying, "He wouldn't have to give up theater work. He could afford a bigger and better house, show better movies, if that's what he wants. It would be a step up. A big step."

But — *me* convince him? A kid?

"He seems to have some sort of prejudice against Mr. Hurst, Jeff. I don't know why. The Hursts are lovely people. Mrs. Hurst does get herself talked about, it's true. They say she's a little fast. And George fusses every now and then about the little bit I do, myself. But . . . Well, here I'm keeping you outside when you want to go in. Just talk to him, would you, Jeff?"

It wasn't easy; George didn't give me much opening. But I did finally get to ask him, as naturally as I could, if he'd decided to sell.

He was very casual. "No, Jeff," and he went on threading the projector as though there were nothing more to be said.

I thought a minute. "I'd sorta like to see you get a place like the Imperial, Mr. Hawes."

"Not my type. If I owned a house like that, I'd have to play the kind of shows they do. This suits me fine, here."

"I hear this Mr. Hurst's made you a good offer." (I hadn't, really. Just guessing from what Bessie said.)

"Yeah, and you know what I said before."

He started to say more, but then he stopped and mopped his face, which was wet with sweat in that hot little projection booth.

"Go get me a piece of ice to suck on," he said to me.

I went over and opened the bottom of the water cooler which he'd installed outside the door of the booth. But he'd forgotten to fill it with ice; there was only warm water in the ice section.

"You didn't put any ice in it today," I called.

"Well, get the ice pick and chip some up and fill it, would you? Then bring me a little piece of ice."

I ducked into George's office and reached up on the door jamb where he kept the ice pick stuck in the wood. It was a sharp pick with a stout, square, steel handle. You could really put a drive behind it and make the chips fly if you wanted to.

I got George his ice from the

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little icebox nearby and popped a piece into my own mouth. By that time, I'd forgotten all about the business of selling the Graphic to Hurst.

I remembered it later in the day. Going down the street, I ran into Joe. Someone else had been filling in for Joe on the piano that day.

"Hi, Joe," I said, surprised. "I thought you were home sick."

He took a minute to place me.

"Oh, hi, kid. Naw, I had some business."

"They sure miss you up at the Graphic."

He grinned a little. "Anybody could pound 'em out good enough for that dump."

"Not like you, Joe." Then I thought of Hurst. "Suppose Mr. Hawes sells out, like they're trying to get him to? What'll you do then?"

When he grinned this time, it was sort of to himself. "I'm not worried, kid. Old Joe'll get along. Might even sell clothes for Hurst."

It wasn't but a couple of days when there was trouble at the Graphic. And a couple of days later there was more trouble. I got it in a roundabout way, so I decided not to believe it until George or Bessie said something about it.

When I showed up in the projection booth the next week, I could see that George wasn't his usual self. It could have been the heat, because the summer was working up to a scorcher. But it proved to be something else.

"Jeff, I'm glad to see you!" he almost yelled, grabbing me by the arm. "Come in here and get on these machines. I've been getting film breaks right and left, and it's just bum threading, that's all it is."

"Yeah?"

George was one of the few guys still left in the Twenties who did his swearing by initials.

"H., yes! And who could thread right if he had to put up with all I've had to put up with the last few days?"

"What's wrong?" I could already see he had his loops too small for the next reel. I started in adjusting.

"That g.d. Hurst, that's what's wrong! Tuesday, a fellow comes in here from the Board of Health. Inspection, to see if I keep a sanitary place. Says somebody — he wouldn't say who — had complained that the floor was filthy, that he'd seen rats running around the place. Now you know, Jeff, that's a g.d. lie! This inspector had to admit, even if there's nothing fancy here, that I do keep it clean."

He stepped outside and fished a piece of ice from the cooler and came back talking around the ice in his mouth.

"As if *that* wasn't enough, on Thursday a guy from the Fire Department comes and says somebody's written them complaining that the Graphic is a fire-trap. Well, now, that concrete floor's not gonna burn. There's no fancy carpets to go up like across the street at those other

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places. I keep fire extinguishers handy, too. Even the film nowadays is safety film and won't go up in a flash, the way it used to. Why, what in h., I even use a white wall for a screen, and that's something else won't burn! I told him all that. Oh, I told him good! Ended up, I have to put lights over the Exit doors. Well, that won't break my pocketbook."

"Anyway, they backed down, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm not worried about any of that. It just gets me. I know Hurst is behind all this. He's trying to wear me down, make me sell."

"You know he is?"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, Jeff. I've seen this same sort of thing, right there on that screen, a dozen times over. Next thing you know, he'll come around and he won't offer me as much as he did the first time. Just wait and see. But let me tell you, Jeff, the son-of-a-gun will have to burn the Graphic down around me to get me out. I can stand it as long as he can."

Neither of us was paying any attention. I was still checking the machine, and George was stooping over the film can under the table. There were several reels still in the can. Neither one had his eye on the door.

All of a sudden George said, "What in the —" just as I caught a flicker of something out of the corner of my eye. I looked up quickly. George stooped still farther and grabbed something out of the can in a hurry. He threw it on the floor.

"Some stupid —" he shouted, and stamped down hard. I watched for him to take his foot away.

It was a cigarette butt.

"If that hadn't been safety film, I'd have been cooked," he growled; and he stepped outside fast. I looked, but all I could see was the dark. Whoever had pulled this poor excuse for a joke, or whatever it was, had gone. Even when George came back, baffled, and asked me, all I could say was that I hadn't seen who threw it. But, for some reason, I remembered that butt.

That afternoon I was in Camp's Drug Store getting a soda when Mr. Hurst came in and pulled up the wire-legged stool beside me. He didn't know me from Adam, so I don't know why I said anything. Because I felt sorry for George, I guess.

"Mr. Hurst," I said.

He looked at me, sort of surprised.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Hawes won't sell the Graphic to you. Don't you know that? Why don't you leave him alone?"

He stared at me, then his face got kind of dark.

"I don't have troubles enough! Now I have kids trying to tell me my business! Didn't you ever hear kids should be seen and not heard?"

I was a little scared. Such a cowardly looking guy, I'd thought, and here he was turning out anything but. I quickly sucked up my soda and left.

Three or four days later I ran into

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Charlie Lester, who was in my grade in school, and he was asking me how last week's chapter of the serial came out. I told him. Then he said some funny things.

"Them Haweses is as good as the show, anyway."

He lived right next door to them, so I let him talk.

"Mostly we don't know they're around," he said, and I could see he was watching something in his mind. "But last night, late — I don't know the time, but it was late, because they woke me up — old lady Hawes musta just come in. First thing I knew, old George lets out a yell about where's she been? A woman's got rights, she says, or hasn't he heard about woman — woman suffer — suffer — well, something — hasn't he heard about it yet? Sure, you got rights, he says, but I've been hearing things, let me tell you. Why do you always leave the show before I lock up? he says. Tell me that. I have a right to some friends, she says. And what have you heard, anyway? I've heard plenty, he yells. But I always thought you could be trusted. Now I'm not so sure. You'd rather believe the lies? she asks him. Lies? he says, and he tamed down some. Well, now, he says, I see it clearer. It's just some more of that Hurst's scheme, he says, sort of talking to himself. She doesn't say anything to that. I better not catch him spreading this stuff, old Hawes says. Let him watch his own back yard, from what I hear. He'd better mind his tongue about mine."

Charlie stopped and looked me over.

"Well?" I said, "What else?"

"That's all. They shut up then. At least, that's all I could make out."

Next Saturday was the last chapter of the serial, and I went down to the Graphic as usual. It was one hot day. I remember it for the heat as much as anything.

Bessie looked pretty wilted and burnt-out when she passed me in. For the first time, I didn't think she was pretty. She wasn't smiling, maybe that was the reason.

"Go ahead, Jeff," she said, in a heavy voice. "When the last brick of this place falls to the ground, I'll be here selling tickets and you and George will be running the projectors. How's that seem to you as a future?"

I would have put an arm around her, the way I did to Mom when she was down in the dumps, but the booth was in between. I just went on in.

I looked to see if it was Joe at the piano. The playing seemed a little ragged. It was Joe, so it must have been the heat that threw him off.

George had his shirt off and was down to his BVDs. Nowadays he'd be in his shorts, period, but then that was as far as he felt he could go and stay decent. He was sucking ice and mopping his face. Even his mustache had little watery beads on it, and his face glistened with sweat.

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He didn't bother to talk, just nodded and waved me to come in.

I looked around for something to do, but there wasn't anything. So I started watching the show through the porthole.

"This is a bum print they sent us this time," said George. "Film's old and rotten. A lot of splices already. We can look for it to break almost any time."

"Like me and the Graphic," I said.

George was a little startled. "What's wrong?"

"Pop told us last night he's been transferred. We're moving out to Chicago by the end of summer. He's been made some kind of superintendent or manager. I don't know. I don't care. I don't want to go."

George reached over and slapped me on the back. "There are lots worse things, boy. You'll get over it."

Then he leaned over and squinted through the porthole. Was that Hurst coming in the front door, in that short burst of sunshine? As hot as I was, I wasn't sure of anything. It might even have been Bessie.

I forgot about it in the next minute, because there was a brittle snap and a sort of flapping. The film had broken. George and I acted together. I jerked the *ONE MOMENT PLEASE* slide over into position and threw it on the screen, while George teased the film out of the projector and went to work on a fast splice. He had the emulsion scraped, the cement on, and the patch made before somebody else could have realized what happened. In almost no time, we were back in operation.

When we had finished, George was dripping sweat, and so was I.

"Take her a little bit, Jeff," he said. "I'm going out in the alley and cool off. Then I'll spell you."

He left. I kept one eye on the screen and one on the film unreeling in the projector, if you can believe it. It can be done. Everything kept going all right, so I relaxed.

Then I got thirsty. I stepped to the cooler and drew some water. It was warm. I opened the ice compartment. No ice. All melted.

I stepped across to the office quickly and reached for the ice pick.

No ice pick.

I went and looked in the little icebox. Ice, but no ice pick.

Disgusted, I started back to the booth.

All of a sudden, down front, Joe came down on that old beat-up piano with a big jangling discord. It sounded like he was tearing the thing apart. I must have jumped a foot.

Kids were out of their seats all over the place. Somebody yelled, "Something's happened to Joe," and somebody went out the front door fast. The exit door to the alley opened and shut as somebody else either went out or came in. A hullaballoo started.

I did the only thing possible. I cut the machine and threw on the house lights.

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Then the noise really got going. Kids were milling and shouting all over the place. George and Bessie were right in the middle of it, trying to shoo them out in orderly fashion. I left the booth and elbowed my way down to see what the trouble was.

Joe Stockton lay over the keyboard of his piano. A lot of the white keys were red. Out of the back of Joe's neck stuck the handle of the ice pick.

After a while the only ones there were George, Bessie, me, and the cops. George tried to ease me out, but the cops wouldn't let him.

They were asking questions, and George was bellowing.

"Who did it? That Hurst, that's who! He can't get me out any other way, so he murders my piano player to give the Graphic a bad name and get my license revoked!"

One cop, a leather-faced old guy with stripes on his sleeve, looked at George and shook his head.

"Maybe they do that in the movies," he said, "but I want to hear something more practical."

"He didn't do it himself," amended George. "He's too smart for that. He hired it done."

The cop turned to Bessie.

"Was anybody in here except kids?" She started to talk, but he went on. "Don't lie. I know that on Saturday afternoons you usually get 100 per cent kids."

Bessie gulped and nodded.

"That's what I thought," said the old cop.

Then George sort of collapsed.

"I was the one," he said. "I found out Joe was bothering Bessie here. My wife's a good woman, but Joe wouldn't let her alone. And this g.d. heat, I guess I just went crazy and stabbed him."

The cop looked satisfied.

"That's more like it. That makes sense."

So they took George away. It was like in one of his favorite movies, where the hero kills the villain to save the heroine's honor. And that's the way the papers wrote it up the next day.

As I say, we moved away by the end of summer and I've never had the urge to go back. For one thing, there's a big cut-rate drug store where the old Graphic used to stand.

And life isn't as simple as in the movies George went for. It can be darned tricky.

Because I still remember that cigarette butt George fished out of the film can. It had lipstick on the end of the paper. Bessie almost never smoked, but there weren't any other grown women in the Graphic that day, so she must have been the one who tried to get rid of George. And she'd have succeeded, too, if she hadn't forgotten the film was safety film.

Of course, I can't prove that part. Any more than I can prove that Bessie'd been the one who complained anonymously to the Board of Health and the Fire Department when she thought Hurst was trying

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to buy the Graphic. She thought the pressure would force George to sell.

And when that didn't work, Joe looked even better to Bessie. A man like Joe could take her away from George and on up the ladder. Joe had a drive, she figured, that was missing in George.

I guess that's why George confessed. He must have thought that Joe wouldn't fall in with Bessie's plans and so she'd killed him — the woman scorned or the woman wronged. And maybe George felt responsible for driving Bessie into the whole thing. I don't know.

I do know George had nothing to do with Joe's death. The truth was pretty simple. Joe was playing around with Mrs. Hurst. She was even fool enough over him to give him money and little presents. Well, you know how gossip goes in a town. The gossip about his wife got to Hurst, but he didn't know just who "the guy at the Graphic" — as the rumors put it — was. Hurst's offer to buy was just an excuse so he could hang around the theater and smell out the identity of the guilty man. When he found out it was Joe, Hurst grabbed the ice pick he'd seen in George's office, and he let Joe have it.

How'd they find out all this? So simply, it's silly. People in the early Twenties weren't as fingerprint-conscious as today. Hurst just forgot to wipe the handle of the ice pick.

In some ways, we've changed nowadays. Progress, I guess you'd call it.

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ALL THE BIRDS OF THE AIR

by CHARLES B. CHILD

THEY FOUND HADJI HUSSAIN huddled on a chair in the summer room of his house on the banks of the Tigris. He had a bruise above the forehead and died from a brain hemorrhage shortly after they carried him out.

The room was actually a deep windowless cellar with a single entrance at the foot of an outside flight of steps. An air shaft led to the roof and trapped the river breezes, making the *surdab* a pleasant retreat from the excessive heat.

Inspector Chafik of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Baghdad police appreciated the coolness. Outside, the white light of noon glared on the tiles of the courtyard. The Inspector's shirt stuck to his thin body and disturbed him; he was fastidious about his clothes. Wiping his swarthy face with a handkerchief sprinkled with orange water, he announced, "I consider it unreasonable for people to die on such a hot day."

His assistant, a tall unemotional sergeant, understood why the Inspector was worried about Hussain's death. The Hadji, who was loved and venerated in Baghdad, was head of the courts where ecclesiastical matters such as divorce, questions of Moslem theology, and disputes concerning religious institutions were brought for settlement by the people.

Recently the old man had handed down a decision that concerned a property willed to the Shafiite shrine at Zagros. He had favored the relatives who had brought a complaint of coercion against the shrine. In consequence the Shafiites, a small but fanatic sect, had threatened reprisals, and a police guard had been placed at the Hadji's house.

This affected Sergeant Abdullah personally because the detail had been in his charge, so he began anxiously, "Permit me to report —"

Chafik said, "Later. I have not yet digested the medical report. It is always an unappetizing dish. They tell me the violence of the blow might have killed a younger man. The Hadji was old, frail. If he fell and struck something —"

"Sir, there is nothing to indicate it," said the sergeant. "And what was he doing in the chair?"

"It is possible that after the first impact of the blow he recovered sufficiently to find his feet and stumble to the chair. He may have retained consciousness until the clot formed."

The Inspector had strange dun-colored eyes, flat and expressionless except when he was worried. He looked around trying to visualize what had happened. The room was very simply furnished. There were a

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cot, a few chairs, straw mats on the tiled floor, a bedside lamp; near the lamp was an open copy of the Koran which had been put down so hurriedly the edges of the pages were folded. A light blanket was flung back from the foot of the bed.

Chafik said, "There is the impression of a head on the pillow; the Hadji was reposed. And the position of the Koran, of the blanket, tells us he was rudely disturbed. The interruption occurred shortly after he came to rest, otherwise he would not have been reading. The aged do not have to woo sleep."

He folded his slender hands and glanced at the sergeant, who knew what was expected and immediately began to quote from memorized notes, "Sir, the Hadji entered the *surdab* after the noon prayer. He was escorted by a retainer named Murad, who closed the door behind his master and then proceeded to other duties. Murad is the house watchman."

"Where were you stationed, Abdullah?"

"I was in the courtyard, sir, where I could observe all the people of the house. I now list them. First, there is Mr. Romani, the deceased's nephew, visiting from Amara —"

"A lawyer. I know of him," Chafik said.

"Then there is Mr. Sadir, a young man who lives here."

"His father died two months ago and was a close friend of the Hadji, who was appointed guardian to the youth. I find it strange," Chafik added, "that an adult should require a guardian, but there are rumors Sadir preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Life there is gay."

"A sinful city," said the sergeant.

"The mole," remarked Chafik, thinking of his own city of the dusty plains, "without doubt calls the lark sinful. But continue."

"Sir, Mr. Sadir and Mr. Romani also retired because of the heat. Their rooms are on the second floor. The servants, too, were in their quarters. Only the watchman Murad remained active. He stood at the main gate within my view." The sergeant cleared his throat, then stood rigidly at attention and said without inflection, "It is now necessary to make confession —"

"You slept?"

"Because of the heat, I dozed, sir. Briefly, only a few minutes, but I deserve reprimand. When I opened my eyes I saw Murad running toward the *surdab*. I halted him. He said he had heard the door open and thought his master had called out. We both proceeded to the spot. The door was indeed open and we saw the Hadji collapsed on the chair. I sent Murad for Mr. Romani, who came at once. Over my protests, he carried his uncle to an upper room."

"It was unwise to move a dying man, but in this case, it probably made little difference. You searched the room after the Hadji was taken out?"

"Diligently. There was nothing that resembled a weapon here."

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"And where was Mr. Sadir?"

"In his room, sir. He is a heavy sleeper and had to be forcibly roused."

The Inspector looked at the bare walls of the *surdab*. The only break in the smooth brickwork was the air shaft; it resembled a narrow chimney and ended about six feet above the floor in an open vent. Chafik could see a small square of sunlight far above. The twittering of many birds echoed down the shaft and reminded him that the old man had loved birds and given them sanctuary in his garden.

"This place may be cool," the Inspector said, "but I do not find it restful. The birds are noisy."

Sergeant Abdullah interrupted, "Now what a knucklehead I am! I forgot to tell you about the bird."

"A bird?"

"Dead, sir —"

"Where?"

"Here in the *surdab*. It lay on the Hadji's lap, in his hand. I have labeled it as an exhibit."

He produced a pathetic bundle of black and white feathers. The bird had a forked tail and rakish wings; there was a chick's down on the breast.

Chafik said, "A swift." He touched the dangling head. "The neck is broken, it has not been dead long. A lazy fledgling that refused to fly until it was pushed from the nest. Possibly it tumbled down the air shaft, a not uncommon occurrence. Or perhaps it fell against the door. The thud might have disturbed the Hadji, made him leave his cot and open the door —"

He stopped and gave Abdullah a sharp look; the sergeant's rare expressions were easy to read and Chafik said with sudden wrath, "So you think somebody was waiting outside the door?"

"Sir, it did enter my mind."

"Was this person invisible that he wasn't seen by the watchman at the gate? Was he foolhardy enough to stand there while you were briefly dozing a few yards away? What fiction have you been reading?"

As he left the room, the Inspector added indignantly, "Must everybody die murdered to please you, Abdullah?"

The house was a relic of old Baghdad. Rooms opened on an inner courtyard tiled with honey-colored brick. An archway led to a terrace that faced the river. There was a garden bright with flowers and shaded by ancient trees, all enclosed within a high wall.

Chafik joined two men who were waiting on the terrace. One was the Hadji's nephew, a middle-aged man with the sallow hungry look of a sufferer from a stomach ailment. Romani, who practiced law in the southern town of Amara, came to Baghdad several times a year to visit his uncle.

His companion was much younger, little more than a youth, and had a downy mustache. He looked bored. The cut of his clothes and the way he wore them gave Chafik a twinge of

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envy and he hoped that one day he, too, might visit a Cairo tailor. Reluctantly, he looked away from the dapper Sadir and waited for the older man to speak.

Romani asked, "Have you formed a conclusion?"

"I let facts form their own conclusions."

The Hadji's nephew nodded approval. "It is a definite fact," he said in his thin clear voice, "that my uncle was threatened. The Shafiites are a lawless people."

"In the past they have not stopped at assassination," the Inspector said.

"On the other hand," Romani said, "it is wrong to use the history of yesterday as evidence of violence done today."

Chafik made a little bow. "How justly you correct me! But I can say what I think about them because you alone took serious view of their threats. Your uncle did not."

"In point of fact I agreed with him. But I advised him to ask for police protection as a precautionary measure, and when he refused, I took the step myself. Naturally."

Chafik thought he knew why Romani's law practice was small. The man was too cautious. He had a good reputation, always refused doubtful cases, but such legal ethics did not appeal to minds nurtured by the labyrinth of bazaars where business was conducted in Iraq.

The inspector turned for relief to Sadir. "What did you think of the threats?" he asked the young man.

Sadir was polishing his manicured nails. He looked up languidly and said, "I am used to the civilized life of Egypt. I confess I paid little attention to this talk of threats and violence." He mopped his face with a handkerchief. "Such heat!" he complained.

"You miss Cairo?" Chafik asked.

Surprised and pleased that somebody should understand him, Sadir became confidential. "This place destroys me," he said. "There is no beauty here. Life is so crude, so lacking in urbanity —"

Romani interrupted, "Do not take our time with your foolish problems, Sadir. I know you wish to return to Cairo. It matters little to me personally, but the legal aspect of your case must be carefully considered. You were made my uncle's ward for two years. But we will discuss this later."

The young man flushed and moved away up the terrace. Romani shook his head and said sternly, "He has no sense of responsibility. Have you any more questions, Inspector?"

"I was going to ask if you entirely rule out the possibility of an intruder."

The Hadji's nephew looked down at the river, at a fisherman who stood in the shallows, his brown arm lifted to throw a weighted casting net. "I rule out nothing," he said finally. "But how could an intruder pass the police guard? Observe, for example, the height of the wall on the river side. The Tigris is at its lowest, there

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is a drop of 30 feet to where that fisherman stands. The door at the top of the steps that lead down to the water is always locked."

Chafik interrupted, "What do you know about Murad, your uncle's watchman?"

"I believe he is able and trustworthy."

"He has a Kurdish name. The Shafiites are a Kurdish sect —"

Romani said, "I close my ears. What you say is slanderous, even defaming, and as a lawyer I advise you to be more cautious."

The Inspector permitted himself the thought that this man probably tested the temperature of his bath water before he put a toe in it. Venturing another question, he asked, "Did you know your uncle was nursing a dead bird when he was found?"

Romani was startled. "A dead bird? No."

"It may have fallen down the air shaft or against the door. Your uncle loved birds. Something disturbed him in the *surdab*. If it was the bird he would have jumped up to succor it, and then —"

"In his haste he slipped, struck something —"

"Conjecture," Chafik said, smiling at his mild triumph. "But you may be right." He stopped, almost deafened by a shrill outcry from the many birds perched on the roof. "How noisy they are!" the Inspector said.

"I do not share my uncle's affection for birds. He would not allow a single nest to be destroyed." The thin voice trailed and Chafik looked at the man curiously.

Meeting the Inspector's eyes, the lawyer explained, "I had a thought. I reprimanded you for an unjust suspicion; now I find I have one myself."

"Concerning whom?"

"Murad. On previous visits I noted his sober habits. He rarely left my uncle's side. But lately I have seen him in cafés frequented by people of his class. I thought it odd because he is careful with money."

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest nothing. I merely present facts." The lawyer turned away as a solemn procession began to file through the house gate. "The corpse washers and mourners are here," he said. "Excuse me, Inspector, I have my sad duties."

He went away, carefully choosing the middle of the tiles that flagged the terrace. The Inspector shrugged and turned to Sergeant Abdullah, who stood at his elbow.

"You wish to interrogate the watchman, sir?" asked Abdullah.

He indicated Murad, who stood in the background stiffly at attention, holding a heavy brassbound staff at his side in the position of a grounded rifle. The man had a soldier's straight carriage. His hair and mustache were grizzled; he was quite old.

Chafik said, "Sometimes discreet inquiries are more fruitful than interrogation. I am told this man has changed his habits and become a frequenter of cafés. You will check this information."

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"At once, sir."

When Abdullah left, Chafik completed his inspection of the house. He climbed high steps to the gallery surrounding the upper floor. Here had been the quarters of the harem women, but it was many years since bright eyes had peeped through the iron latticework of the windows.

One door was open. The Inspector glanced inside and nodded approval of the neatness. This must be Romani's room, he thought.

More steps led to the flat roof which had served as a promenade for the women in the cool of the day. At this hour it was exposed to the glare of the sun and Chafik covered the nape of his neck before venturing out.

He was greeted by a scolding chorus from the gathering of birds and was puzzled by their behavior until he looked up and saw a hawk poised in the sky. The birds were swifts, a gregarious species that banded together against an enemy. They commonly nested in old buildings.

Chafik loitered to watch a pair perched on an air shaft. The cock picked up a wisp of straw and offered it to the hen, who chirped plaintively and ruffled her feathers. Such obvious dejection roused the Inspector's sympathy and he said, "The fledgling that fell, was it yours?" He heard himself and was embarrassed because it was an old habit, this talking to himself.

Briefly he looked at the air shaft which rose a few feet above the parapet of the roof. The small vent in the side faced upriver to catch the prevailing summer breeze. Possibly this was the shaft which fed the *surdab*. There were traces of a nest in the vent, and Chafik wondered who had destroyed it. The Hadji would not have sanctioned it, but a servant might have taken unauthorized action.

"Was it your nest?" Chafik asked the unhappy pair, who had made shrill complaint at his approach.

He was again embarrassed by the sound of his voice making foolish conversation with birds. Walking to the far side of the roof, which overlooked the river, he glanced over the parapet. The fisherman he had noticed earlier was still standing motionless in the shallows.

The Inspector watched idly and then called down, "What fortune?"

The man looked up. "Fortune will come if Allah wills," he answered.

"Do you expect fish to rise in this heat?"

"Who can be certain of the ways of fish and men?" the man said, shrugging. "But I know there is a fish. It jumped and roused me when I was sleeping after the noon prayer. A very big fish, it made a big splash. I will get half a dinar for it in the bazaar."

"You are patient. It is three hours since the noon prayer."

The man said stubbornly, "He will rise when the sun goes down."

"May you be rewarded," Chafik said.

He went down the steps and passed the ground-floor room where the

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Hadji lay on the funeral bier, surrounded by chanting mourners. In the garden Chafik found Abdullah, who announced, "Sir, I have made the inquiries you requested. It is true about Murad."

"He frequents cafés?"

"Yes, sir. And I am informed he chooses places that have a Kurdish clientele. The Shafiites are a Kurdish —"

"Yes," said Chafik, twisting the signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. "I trust you made your inquiries discreetly?"

"I am your disciple, sir. I picked one of the lesser servants as a likely informant. When he talked, I arrested him on suspicion of theft so that no gossip of what I asked might reach Murad."

"You are as cautious as Mr. Romani. And now it would be tactful to remove ourselves from this house of mourning," the Inspector said. "My head whirls and I am going home to rest."

Entering his home on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings, Inspector Chafik removed his jacket, loosened his tie, and announced to Leila, his wife, "I shall forgo food. Food causes a body to perspire. A perspiring body is as unpleasant as a dead one." He dropped into a chair under the ceiling fan.

There was an illusion of coolness; shutters had been closed at an early hour and the tiled floor was sprinkled with water to sweeten the air. The fan, rapidly drying Chafik's dank hair, chilled him; and he said irritably, "Wife, cover my head. You know I am susceptible to colds." He looked at the small boy who waited to greet him and added on a severe note, "A son should help his mother. Remove my shoes, Faisal."

The boy squatted on his heels. Then, looking up at the tired man in the chair, he asked, "Was it a very bloody murder? Was his throat cut?"

Chafik forgot the heat. He said, "Such words from such tender lips! But the error is mine; I forgot you had ears."

The ears of the eight-year-old boy who had been a waif in the bazaars of Baghdad, and adopted as the son of a childless marriage, were small and pointed, and he had enormous eyes. The father tweaked an ear and smiled, then looked at his wife who took Faisal away.

She returned to cover her husband's head with a shawl and when he took her hand and held it to his cheek, she knew he was troubled. "Let me share the burden," she said softly.

"Did I speak? Voice a thought? It is such a disturbing habit, this talking to myself."

"You were silent, but a wife reads her man's thoughts," said the small dark woman.

Chafik sat up and lighted a cigarette. "Yes, I am troubled," he admitted, and told her of the death of Hadji Hussain.

Leila exclaimed, "Oh, the poor old

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man! He was so saintly, so beloved."

"His death is a reflection upon my department."

"So it was murder?"

"An accident," Chafik said shortly.

"Then, my man, there can be no blame!"

"Women and ostriches," said her husband, "both seek sand piles for their heads when faced by an unwelcome fact. The Hadji died surrounded by men. Therefore I am responsible, accident or not."

"But it was an accident," Leila insisted.

He said impatiently, "Yes, yes, an accident. It could not be otherwise since the house was so carefully guarded. I do not believe an enemy entered invisibly, struck him and vanished. But —" Chafik looked for an ash tray for his cigarette and Leila hurried to bring one. "The watchman, Murad, changed his habits," he finished.

"That worries you?" She did not understand, but let him talk to ease his mind.

"Everything would seem to indicate that Hadji Hussain's death was accidental. But the behavior of Murad is not clear. And then there is the dead bird. Did it fall inside or outside the *surdab?* And the open door. Did the Hadji open it? Before or after his fatal fall? I must satisfy myself on these points before I make my report," Chafik added as he settled back to rest.

Leila left him and presently he was lulled by the swish of the ceiling fan. He slept perhaps for half an hour, restlessly, muttering to himself. Then something disturbed him and he was abruptly wide awake.

A rhythmic tapping came from the hall adjoining the room and a voice timed to it chanted in a whisper, "Wunna two, abbookel my shoe, three, four, shutter door —"

Inspector Chafik rose and drew back the bead curtain from the doorway. His small son was bouncing a hard ball against the floor; the ball was attached to an elastic looped to Faisal's finger, which made it snap back into his hand.

"Fwife six, piccup six —"

Chafik said, "Macbeth murdered sleep; you murder sleep and the English language. They do not teach you well at school. Say, 'Five, six, pick up sticks.' " The father instructed with the precision that characterized his second tongue. "Six is a numeral. Sticks are instruments of chastisement. I am tempted to use one on you."

He took the ball, looped the elastic over a finger, and idly bounced it. "When you can clearly say, 'One, two, buckle my shoe,' you may have this back," he told Faisal.

Chafik turned away so that he should not see the tears in the boy's eyes; the man who had brought punishment to so many found it hard to punish his own child.

"But, my Father, already I speak English well," Faisal pleaded for approval. "Today I learned, 'Hookilt cockerobbin.' "

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"You learned what?"

"Hookilt —"

Chafik put his hands to his ears. "The word is neither Arabic nor English. Surely you mean, 'Who killed —' and it goes on about a bird. A pity I cannot remember the rhyme exactly, to school you in it. I believe there is something about a sparrow."

The boy interrupted eagerly, "I sedder sparrow wit' my bowen narrow."

"Then," said Chafik, still trying to remember, "there was a fly. And Cock Robin's funeral was quite a social affair. All the birds of the air gathered —"

He stopped and looked blankly at his son and repeated, "All the birds gathered because one died. Yes, they do. Particularly gregarious birds such as swifts and sparrows." He opened his hands in a groping gesture and Faisal's ball fell and dangled unnoticed on its elastic. "I had assumed the hawk had alarmed them," Chafik went on. "A wrong assumption; they gathered to keen the end of the fledgling. And the dead bird in the Hadji's lap, when was it killed, how long before?"

Faisal was bewildered, angry and tearful. "A bird, Father? Who has murdered a bird?"

"Who has murdered, and how?" Chafik repeated softly. Absently he began pulling up the dangling ball by its elastic, then suddenly let it fall and once more pulled it up, watching with growing excitement.

He announced, "There was a fish. It jumped. And a fisherman, a fisherman with his net."

'A net, Father?" Faisal repeated.

"The threads weave a pattern. But who was Death? Who —"

Chafik ran from the house, hatless, into the sun of late afternoon. He was halfway up the road when the wail of his son's voice penetrated the fog of his thoughts.

"Father, my Father, you have forgotten your shoes!" . . .

The Inspector hired a boat at the top of his street and dropped downstream to the river house of Hadji Hussain. He urged the boatman to make speed; he was afraid the fisherman might have gone away.

But the man was still there and looked up reproachfully as the boat floated under the high wall. "You scare my fish," he grumbled.

Chafik said, "It has not risen? Then cast your net. Here is a dinar; let me see your skill. Cast where you saw the splash."

The fisherman whirled the circular net and released it. Opening in mid-air, skimming the water like a giant bat, it struck the spot where he had seen the splash five hours earlier. Weights carried it down and with a leap the man was on it, feeling with his toes for what he had caught.

"There is something, but not a fish," he said with disappointment.

He ducked under and gathered the net around his prize. Shaking out the sand and gravel, he untangled an object and brought it to the boat.

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"A stone wrapped in a cloth," he said with disgust. "My fish!"

Chafik silenced him and examined the catch. Double folds of cloth were fashioned into a small stout bag. Inside was a smooth rock or lump of metal; the weight was about three kilos, the Inspector judged. The neck of the bag was tied by strong twine which had been cut short and left a dangling end.

When Chafik looked up he had the face of a hanging judge and he said to the fisherman, "This day you have netted a man's head." Then he ordered his boat to the shore.

He was admitted to the Hadji's house by the watchman.

Chafik said, "Oh, man of the hills, why did you change your habits and go to cafés? To places frequented by Shafiites?"

Murad answered directly, "I have eaten my master's salt these many years. I went to look for his enemies among those who had threatened him. I would have killed them. Was that not proper?"

The Inspector looked at the man and saw tears in his eyes. He patted Murad's arm and said, "Forgive me, my mind follows tortuous paths. I did not perceive such a simple explanation. Go with God, faithful servant."

He ran up the steps to the roof. Swifts were darting to and fro in the golden light of early evening, but the disconsolate pair he had noticed on his previous visit were still perched on the *surdab* air shaft.

Chafik said, "Be comforted, you who witnessed this thing. Your evidence is now very clear."

He put the weighted bag by the shaft and went down to the gallery on the second floor. The mourners were still chanting below and there was an odor of incense.

The Inspector entered Romani's room and made a careful search of closets and drawers. His task was simplified by the lawyer's tidiness and he was soon finished. Empty-handed and troubled, Chafik announced in a flat voice, "Of course, one so cautious might have destroyed it."

He went out and tried several of the other rooms. Left of the steps leading to the roof he found another that was tenanted, and when he saw the clothing scattered around, the cluttered drawers, he had censorious thoughts for youth. But he searched methodically and disregarded the impulse to tidy the shambles.

With long, sensitive fingers he probed the confusion in the drawers of the dressing table. Then, from the jumble of odds and ends, he took out a tangled ball of strong cord. He put it in his pocket and continued the search.

There were letters with Cairo postmarks. He skimmed through them unaware that the chanting below had stopped, that the ceremony of preparing the corpse of Hadji Hussain was over. He was still reading, oblivious to his surroundings, when instinct warned him and he looked up.

Sadir stood in the doorway, and

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behind him was the gaunt figure of Romani. Sadir said petulantly, "What are you doing in my room reading my letters?"

"You will explain, Inspector," interposed Romani sternly. "I strongly disapprove of this irregular action. As a lawyer —"

"The hyena," said Chafik, "normally follows in the wake of the lion. I have not yet made the kill."

"I shall complain —"

"Complainants, some of them, await on the roof. Let us join them." The Inspector made his little bow.

He escorted the two men from the room and up the steps. Sadir had a dazed look and he stumbled. Romani's thin body was stooped. No one spoke.

When they were on the roof, Chafik said, "The open door of the *surdab* led me astray, but now I know who opened it. The Hadji received a fatal blow, and when he was able, he stumbled to the door for help. But already it was too late, and he collapsed after he opened it."

"An accident," insisted Romani. "My uncle tripped and fell."

"It was murder."

"He was alone in the room."

"Yes," said Chafik. "He was alone, yet he was attacked. I will show you how it was done. But we lack a dead bird, a fledgling. There was one in a nest here." The Inspector pointed to the vent of the air shaft. "Your uncle did not permit nests to be destroyed, but it was necessary to remove this one to clear the shaft. The marks on the stone prove it was done recently. Even more conclusive is the agitation of the birds. Have you noticed how many swifts have gathered, a whole community rallying to a bereaved family?"

Romani said, "Come to the point. I know nothing about birds."

Chafik said, "Fortunately I have a son who remembered an English nursery rhyme. But to continue. The nest was destroyed, the neck of the fledgling was twisted, and as bait for the old man who loved birds it was dropped down the shaft."

He looked from one man to the other. The lawyer was tense, his forehead furrowed as though he concentrated on a difficult brief. Sadir's dazed eyes stared and he chewed his underlip.

"The Hadji was reading," continued Inspector Chafik. "He was disturbed by the fall of the bird and rose to succor it. He picked it up, wondered what had caused the fatality, and naturally looked up the air shaft. Then this happened."

Chafik produced the weighted bag found in the river and knotted to the neck the ball of twine from Sadir's drawer. He said conversationally, "This is how a man was killed," and dropped the weight down the shaft, retaining the end of the line in one hand.

Nothing in 40 feet of smooth brickwork impeded the fall. When the bag struck the floor of the *surdab* the sound echoed back.

"Not a perfect test," Chafik apologized. "It was not so noisy when it

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struck the Hadji's head. The force of a three-kilo weight falling 40 feet can be calculated. It was not necessary to practice marksmanship — the opening is small and the target was large. Even a glancing blow would have been fatal to a frail old man."

He stopped and for the first time looked directly at Sadir. The young man's mouth opened, but no sound came from it.

"And then," the Inspector said pitilessly, "you hauled up your weapon, cut the line short and threw the bag into the river. Did you fear the line would float? But how careless of you to leave it in your room! Otherwise you planned well, took nice advantage of foolish threats made against your victim by quite harmless people. You reasoned that with a police guard around the house the death of a man in a closed room would be considered an accident. And you would have been right if parent birds had not keened the cruel death of a fledgling, if my son had not played with a toy which I found very suggestive. And if there had not been a patient fisherman in the shallows."

Romani shook his head and said in his thin voice, "This case has a weakness. What was the motive for the alleged crime?"

"You yourself told me this wretched young decadent preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Also there are letters from a woman which suggest a powerful motive. Sadir was desperate to get back to her, but the Hadji had been appointed his guardian and controlled his money and his freedom. Young, spoiled, ruthless — I trust you are convinced, Mr. Romani?"

Lulled by the cadence of his own voice, the Inspector was unprepared when the lawyer turned with unexpected speed and caught Sadir by the throat. "You killed my uncle! You killed my uncle!" he screamed as he forced the young man to his knees.

Chafik broke the death grip. "Restrain yourself!" he said sharply, and then with a smile he added, "Such depth of emotion, Mr. Romani! How admirable — and how unexpected in one so cautious!"

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Add to the galaxy of great literary figures who have contributed to EQMM, add to such lustrous names as Sinclair Lewis, W. Somerset Maugham, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, George Bernard Shaw, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Aldous Huxley, O. Henry, H. G. Wells, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Galsworthy, Guy de Maupassant, Robert Louis Stevenson . . . now add to that illustrious company the name of Dorothy Canfield Fisher . . .

The author of THE DEEPENING STREAM *and* THE BRIMMING CUP *has devoted her extraordinarily full life to doing good for others — through her humanitarianism, through her art and scholarship, through her wonderful good will; and yet it can be said, in absolute truth, that Dorothy Canfield Fisher has been primarily a wife, mother, grandmother, and homemaker. Her career is a composite of a dozen careers, and all remarkably successful.*

Her novels have been extremely popular, chiefly because she had always written out of her own experience. She knows the people on college faculties, the French peasants, the women of small American towns, and especially the New England villagers among whom she has lived so many years. As one critic has said, Dorothy Canfield Fisher is "full of motherly understanding and tolerance of human beings." You will find that acutely true in the mystery by Dorothy Canfield Fisher which we now bring you . . .

A SLEEP AND A FORGETTING

by DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

THIS WAS NOT ONE OF THE USUAL cases of failure of memory, written up occasionally in the newspapers. After his sojourn in chaos, he did not return to life as an unrecognized bit of wreckage to be discharged from the hospital without a label. Most people in the garden-like suburb where he lived knew the details of his automobile accident, and knew him to be Matthew Warren. They did, but he did not. When the doctor, the well-known James Farquhar, M.D. — the closest friend of the injured man and his wife — said that he might see his family for a moment, Matthew Warren looked dully at the handsome woman and the two blooming children who came to stand by his hospital bed.

"Who are those people?" he asked his nurse. But, as he spoke, he lost interest in them. His wife drew back quickly. The children looked fright-

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ened. Dr. Farquhar motioned them to leave. He did not seem surprised.

From that time on, for several days, the doctor was never far from the sick man's room. He was waiting for the moment when Matthew Warren would have his first glimpse of what had happened.

One night the sick man woke from sleep with a scream which brought the doctor to him in a bound. "Who am I? Who am I?" The sick man called wildly into the darkness. The doctor turned on the light. Matthew Warren dug his fingers into the doctor's arm, ground his teeth together, was silent. Then, between long-drawn shuddering breaths, he said hoarsely, "I'm very s-s-sorry to trouble you, b-b-but I seem to have h-h-had a nightmare of some s-s-sort, and I can't — I can't remember who I am."

Two months later he seemed quite himself again — physically. Not mentally. The doctor tried every device he could invent. No success. Finally, after a last consultation with the hospital staff, it was decided to try taking the sick man home. Perhaps, the doctors argued dubiously, the familiarity of his surroundings might reach through the cloud in his brain. The experiment was tried.

Matthew Warren, looking just as he had looked before the accident, went along docilely with Dr. Farquhar, his old friend, whom he continued to treat as a new acquaintance. He stepped into the train with no surprise, looked about him quietly, presently opened a window with a practised commuter's knowledge of the catch, and talked, as he had ever since his recovery, calmly of the every-day objects before him. He was especially interested in the first signs of spring in the early April landscape, pointing out to his companion with pleasure the gray sheen of pussy-willows and, as the train approached the prosperous suburban region, commenting on the brilliant green of the well-kept lawns around the large, rambling, green-shuttered white houses.

He sauntered up the well-raked gravel of the driveway toward his own expensive house, looking like Matthew Warren returning, as usual, after his day in the city; and also as usual, coming to meet him was Mrs. Matthew Warren, perfectly groomed, perfectly coiffed, wearing a shade more make-up than usual, to hide the fact that she was very pale.

She advanced slowly, and as her husband drew near, she stopped short, looking at him guardedly. She had never recovered from the shock of meeting those blankly unresponsive eyes at the hospital. It had withered something deep in her. Dr. Farquhar looked keenly at her closed face and taut lips. He regretted the experiment.

Matthew Warren lifted his hat. "I hope you will pardon our trespassing upon your beautiful grounds," he said. She winced, and looked away from him. He continued, "My friend has, I believe, some errand bringing him here." Matthew put on his hat, stepped a little to one side to allow

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his wife and the doctor to walk together, and in an instant had forgotten them, and was stooping over the green spears of daffodils thrusting their glistening shafts through the earth.

The woman questioned the doctor with a mute challenging look. Till then she had always been a proudly satisfied woman, and her pride, grown great and exacting, revolted angrily against this grotesque trial put upon her by fate.

Her eyes and the attentive eyes of the doctor met searchingly.

"Let us try the house," he said.

She walked beside him in silence. Matthew Warren followed them, gazing down at the newly green grass and up at the trees swinging swollen buds in the warm, damp air. He looked curiously young, not so old by ten years as the man who, three months before, had swung his car down that driveway for the last time.

"Jim, I thought best not to have the children here," murmured the wife.

The doctor nodded. "Probably better. Though I've no idea how he would take them. His has been an especially hard case, because the mere mention of his lost identity throws him into a fever. Otherwise he has been quite reasonable." He stopped, looked over his shoulder at the man loitering behind them, and said pressingly, urgently, "Now listen, you must remember that it is absolutely essential to keep perfectly calm, yourself. Matt is a very, very sick man."

Mrs. Warren glanced back at her husband. All her big, handsome, healthy body seemed to shrink. She looked ill. She seemed to herself to be in a nightmare. It was incredible that she, of all people, should be in such a situation!

The owner of the house stepped up on the flagstoned terrace and looked admiringly at the view of the Hudson, the view which he himself had discovered, and for the sake of which the house had been placed where it stood.

"What a splendid stretch of the river your terrace has." The three stood before the house. His wife looked at the doctor, opened the door without speaking and motioned her guests into the long chintz-furnished living-room. Coals shimmered in the fireplace Matthew Warren had designed. On the coffee-table were scarlet tulips. Again he broke their silence with a pleasant comment:

"Those tulips are especially fine, aren't they? They are more like fire than the fire itself." He glanced casually, indifferently, into his wife's face, then at the doctor, as if wondering a little that he did not bring up the object of their call. Then he moved away and looked absently out of the window. A lilac bush grew near it. With an exclamation of delight he looked more closely at it through the glass. "Some of those buds are opening!" he announced joyfully to the two who watched him so narrowly. "I see a real little leaf — and another!"

He was answered by an hysterical

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scream from his wife, and whirled about in astonishment to see the doctor motioning her sternly to silence. She clapped her shaking hand over her mouth, but she could not repress another scream as she met her husband's politely concerned, questioning eyes. And then suddenly she took matters in her own hands. She flung aside the doctor's detaining arm and rushed toward the sick man, crying out:

"Matt! Matt! Come to yourself! Look at me! Why, I'm Molly! *I'm Molly!*" She was sobbing furiously.

Before she reached him she had recoiled from his rigid, unresponsive body. Matthew Warren did not seem aware of her. He stood motionless, his eyes turning with a sick slowness upon the doctor.

"Who am I?" he asked solemnly. On his deeply congested face and neck the veins stood out like wires.

Dr. Farquhar, making the best of a very bad turn, decided to risk one bold stroke. He advanced and said, clearly and masterfully, "You are my dear old friend Matthew Warren, and I am Jim Farquhar, and this is your home and your wife."

The other's eyes were fixed on a distant point. After a moment, he turned stiffly and walked toward the door.

"There is some mistake," he said, fumbling at the latch. "I admit that for the moment I cannot remember who I am, but I have never been in this house before, and this is the first time I ever saw that lady." His trembling hands failed to open the door, and the trifling delay seemed a match touched to tinder. He began to beat on the lock and to scream: "I don't know who I am! Why doesn't somebody tell me who I am? I can't remember who —"

Before the doctor could reach him, he had crumpled down into a horridly inhuman heap.

His wife ran shrieking from the room.

His prostration after this second shock was deep. He could not be moved back to the hospital. The slow month of confusion and hardly breathing weakness he spent in his own bed in his own room under the care of two male nurses. His wife had insisted upon men. She would not feel safe, she told the doctor, with women nurses. Suppose he had another spell of violence. The doctor advised her to keep out of the sick room, counsel which she seemed eager to obey. The children she sent away, out of town, to their grandparents. As she walked restlessly around the silent house, she looked lonely and frightened. One day the doctor stopped beside her. "This is hard on you," he said kindly.

She answered with passion, "What wicked thing have I done to deserve this!"

She made a great effort to hide from the doctor the horror she had of her husband's condition. She suspected Farquhar of watching her for a sign of it. But the day when the master of the house was reported to her by

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the doctor as up and dressed, she could not repress an anguished cry, "Oh, Jim, what will happen to us now!"

Yet when, evading his nurses with cunning, he crept from the house and disappeared, she led the search for him with unwearied faithfulness. She followed every clue suggested to her. She set every possible agency in action. She went unflinchingly with the doctor to look at a corpse recovered from the river. After ten days in this bad dream, Matthew Warren was found, in very good health, not a mile from his own house. He was spading up a bed in the vegetable garden of old Timothy O'Donovan, the truck farmer who supplied the suburb with green vegetables. As the lost man spaded, he whistled loudly. In fact, it was the whistling which led to his discovery. One of his neighbors, walking by, heard the opening melody of a Beethoven trio, and went to see whoever could know that.

The truck farmer had not dreamed that the battered, muddy, half-witted wayfarer who had asked for work a week before could be the wealthy and influential Mr. Warren, owner of the fine house at the other end of town. The stranger had set himself vigorously and cheerfully at the tasks given him and seemed to like the work.

There was a consultation of brain specialists, Dr. Farquhar, and Mrs. Warren. The doctors questioned her minutely as to her husband's mental habits and tendencies, and finally succeeded in unearthing from her memory the fact that after she and Matthew were first married, when they were quite poor, Matthew had seemed to enjoy working in a bit of land about their first small home. In fact, she explained, now that she thought of it there had seemed a danger of his neglecting his real work, his business, with his puttering around in the ground. "But, of course, his business grew rapidly. He was a wonderfully successful man," she said, proud of him. "More and more of his time was taken by his affairs. He did less and less outdoor work. Even here at the house, he often brought business papers back to work at in the evening. Ever since we have lived here he has hired whatever garden work was needed."

It was agreed that in the break-up of his higher faculties he might have returned temporarily to a latent inclination for a lower form of effort. It was thought best to leave him for a while where he was and trust to the slow, healing influence of time and improved physical health. If Mrs. Warren felt an involuntary relief at this decision, she hid it. Throughout the discussion she showed herself loyally willing to do whatever seemed best for the man who had been her husband.

And so began the anomalous situation which was to last so long that even village tongues stopped wagging about it. Mrs. Warren's first distracted impulse had been to take the children

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and go away — abroad perhaps. That had seemed to her the only endurable future. But she gave up this plan when the doctor showed surprise that she should plan to "abandon" a man who might desperately need her at almost any time.

"I see, Jim — yes, of course, I see," she assented submissively. She cared intensely that those who knew of this crisis in her life should approve her reaction to it.

As a matter of fact, her acquiescence to his opinion cost her very little. The miraculous capacity of life to renew itself came brilliantly to the rescue of a personality which, as she said of herself, longed for "normal satisfactions above everything else." It was not long before she had reorganized an existence for herself and her children which was tolerable at first, and later as time slid smoothly by, was not without its great compensations.

There was plenty of money. Matthew's business had been disposed of at a good profit, and she had inherited a modest fortune. As has occasionally happened before to women of her nature, she found life greatly simplified when it was freed of the complications of marriage. Now, with only her own tastes to consult, her own judgments to make, decisions were prompt and easy, with none of the inevitable adjustments when two are to be considered. The children were ten and twelve at the time of their father's mental eclipse. Like their mother, they enjoyed perfect health, had fine digestions, grew fast, gave no anxiety. They adapted themselves with tact and good sense to their odd situation. Like their mother, they were large and comely, with much of her healthful ability to be satisfied with life when arranged in the right pattern. It was hard to connect the well-groomed, prepossessing trio riding and driving about the "residential development" of the carefully restricted suburb, with the shabby, half-daft hired man in overalls, who rarely left the truck farm across the railroad track at the other end of town. In a surprisingly short time even those who knew the circumstances came to regard Mrs. Warren as an ornamental widow and the children as half orphans.

Not that they themselves had the bad taste to make a mystery of the affair. They were perfectly well poised about it. The sad story was told with frank sadness to their intimates. It aroused among the romantics of the children's young friends a sort of admiration, as for something in a book. From the first, they had all three followed to the letter the doctor's recommendations to keep away from the region of the truck farm. They depended for news of the sick man on the doctor himself, who took care to go past the O'Donovan place once in a while to ask about their new helper.

There, too, as usually happens with people absorbed in their own busy affairs, O'Donovan and his wife adjusted themselves to the state of things with a rapidity which some-

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times, when they thought about it, astonished them. The half-fearful curiosity they had felt toward the new laborer, when they first learned his identity, died away little by little as they grew used to his simple, kindly personality. For the second shock, brought on by his wife's wild appeal, had evidently been even more violent than the first. Then he had seemed only to forget his own identity. Now he had lost it. He could not now have opened automatically the window in the commuter's train. That second month of oblivion had left him with practically no memory of any kind. He not only did not know who he was but he could not remember what had happened from one day to the next. The day was in his mental grasp, but a night's sleep wiped the slate clean again. Every dawn he rose up, singing, with a mind as blank of past experiences as a little child's.

This was, of course, the cause of absurd difficulties and inconveniences — until the O'Donovans had found out how to manage him. Since he could not remember instructions given him the day before, not even to continue a task half-completed, the trucker and his wife had several distracting experiences with him, as when, having been set to plow a patch in the garden, he went on plowing the next day because nobody had told him to stop, until he had turned under half the sod of the O'Donovans' only hayfield. Finally, when they spoke to Dr. Farquhar about this one day, he suggested that they take advantage of the capacity of their new servant for reading and writing, and set down in writing what he was to do. It worked very well. Mr. O'Donovan gave him a standing order to carry about with him a pad of paper and a pencil, to set down in black and white every instruction given him, and to consult it often. He obeyed this command with his usual peaceable, absent docility. The O'Donovans told the doctor that to see him walk across the barnyard smiling at his thoughts, you would know he was fey.

After the new helper had thoroughly learned to consult his written orders, O'Donovan boasted that no man could wish for a better hired man than this cheerful, silent, strong, deft-handed laborer. He loved every plant in the long rows of the truck farm. He worked, whistling and singing odd tunes the O'Donovans did not know, all day long, and never asked for a holiday.

Two years after his arrival at the farm he could scarcely have been recognized by his wife and children even if their ways had crossed. Like O'Donovan, he had let his beard grow, a thick mass of brown, without a gray hair in it, although Dr. Farquhar knew him to be nearly 50. Above this, his quiet inward-looking eyes gave no hint of the piercingly satirical look which had been Matthew Warren's.

Timothy O'Donovan and his wife had lost their only child years ago. They grew much attached to the "innocent," whom they regarded as

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a child. Old Mrs. O'Donovan and he had a taste in common for music. She especially petted and cherished him. She was as pleased as he, when he spent his savings on a record player and started a collection of records. From his depending helplessly on the old people, they came — as they grew older and as this adopted member of their family began to seem more "like other people" — to depend on him. He slowly recovered his shattered memory for every-day events. This clearing of part of his brain brought out traces of his superior education. He took some books on truck farming from the branch library near their farm and studied them with interest. O'Donovan had grown vegetables as his father had. They now started some hot-beds for early vegetables. After some years, this grew slowly to be a greenhouse. The younger man liked experiments, which old Donovan could never follow. In these he developed a new variety of tomato, especially suited to the soil of the truck farm. He called it, after Mrs. O'Donovan, the "Eileen," a tribute of which she was proud. Not having a name of his own, the newcomers of the town thought them father and son, and called him Matt O'Donovan. Matt drove the delivery truck around to their customers' doors, and after a while so completely had his past vanished from the dimming minds of the O'Donovans, he was sent occasionally to the Warren house to leave at the kitchen door their daily supply of vegetables.

When Mrs. O'Donovan died, he mourned her with sorrow so sincere that her bereaved old husband felt him to be the one link which still bound him to life. Seven years later old Timothy himself called out loudly in the night, "Matt! Matt!"; and as his hired man stooped over him comfortingly, Timothy smiled at him and died. It was found that he had left the farm and house to the wanderer who, twelve years before, haggard and nameless, had stumbled up his garden path.

The new farmer was not long to lead a solitary life. A great-nephew of O'Donovan's, a boy of fourteen, orphaned in Ireland before his uncle's death, had been left on the unwilling hands of cousins. They had already sent him, without asking permission of the American family, to this O'Donovan uncle. Four or five days after the funeral, he arrived at the house, horribly homesick, horribly alone, and more than willing to accept the home thrown open to him by his uncle's successor, who, he thought, was his own blood kin.

He was one of the shrinking, shy, fawn-eyed type of Irish boy, only son of a widow, handy about the house — "as good as a girl," his dead mother had often said about him. When he had recovered from his first panic he proved himself very useful to the solitary man. He took over the domestic end of the partnership. He had a flute in the little battered chest he had brought with him, proved to have a taste for music, and

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was enthralled by the record player. His guardian arranged for a weekly lesson from a flutist in town. Matt himself sat in the evening, smoking, reading, listening to the singing of the flute in the room above, or, with young Tim, to the chanting and thundering music of the records. They were both in bed by 9 o'clock.

Sometimes, for an outing, he took the lad with him in the delivery truck, pointing out, among other objects of interest, the fine houses, and on the rare occasions when they were late enough in their rounds to see the suburb awake, the miraculously skillful tailoring of the clothes of the people who inhabited them.

Matthew Warren's daughter, after a very successful young-ladyhood competently managed by her mother, was married now. Her husband was a prosperous, steady, commuting banker, considerably older than his wife. They lived in a house rather more expensive and very much more modern than her mother's. In the swift turning of fashion's wheel, the Warren house had become one of the "older residences," with none of the stripped starkness of the home which the daughter was proud to show her friends.

His son had not married. He lived at home with his mother, although he had an intermittent position in — well, what was it? People were never quite sure. Bond-selling perhaps. He was an excellent tennis player, who occasionally drove his convertible past his father's vegetable truck on his way to the tennis courts, his smooth yellow hair tossed back from his unexcited red-tanned face. He looked more and more like his mother. Sometimes their friends laughed over the similarity of their ways. He handled his soup spoon with exactly her gesture.

Mrs. Warren, too, was sometimes to be seen, as handsome, though by no means as slender, as formerly, the image of good comfort and good fortune, moving briskly and capably from one engagement to another, consulting her watch, and tapping a well-dressed foot in impatience at the slowness of her car — precisely as in years gone by. She had never thought, apparently, of seeking a divorce from her husband. Her numerous friends much admired this constancy.

The Warren family relied on the doctor to let them know if the now quite unlooked-for "change" should ever take place, and all of them led absorbing lives of the greatest interest to themselves. They passed the burly, elderly gardener without a look, sincerely forgetful of his identity.

Dr. Farquhar, whom the gardener had come to know again in his new existence, through his visits to the O'Donovans, always nodded as his car passed the vegetable truck, and received in return a neutral tradesman's nod.

Of all those concerned, Dr. Farquhar alone continued to be quite aware of the state of things, and to be unreconciled, almost angrily so. His physician's pride had been stung by

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his professional defeat, and he had a warm affection for his old friend. In spite of Mrs. Warren's cordiality, he could never rid himself of an unfair impulse to blame her somehow for her untroubled good fortune. He told himself that she could not have acted otherwise, but he seemed when with her to feel a vibration from a deep, calm pulse of satisfaction which set his own heart to beating fast, in an irritable distaste which he could not justify. When called to the Warren house professionally, he could not enter the handsome, well-kept home without thinking bitterly of the man exiled from all his natural birthright of dignity, power, and ease, to poverty, obscurity, and daily manual labor. In the earlier years he could not look at Mrs. Warren's hands without seeing the work-worn claws of old Mrs. O'Donovan who so long had furnished poor Warren's only contact with the world of women. He thought of Warren's own hands, which he had known thin, taut, nervously active, now thickened and calloused, lying half open on his knees, in the workingman's passive apathy. Once or twice the doctor had dined with Mrs. Warren and the son who looked so much like her. He had not at all enjoyed the excellent and well-served food. He remembered the not especially savory dish of stew which was poor Matt's fare, prepared by the odd little Irish lout, his house-mate. The doctor was now middle-aged. The Warren house did not look cluttered and stuffy to him, as to the Warren daughter. It looked tasteful and elegant and spacious, and made him rage inwardly at the thought of the bare four-roomed shack which sheltered the real owner of this house. The faithful friend felt Warren's grotesque fate as though it had been his own. He had never been able to stay all through one of Mrs. Warren's dinners.

Once the doctor, after an early-morning emergency call for a servant at the Warren house, came out shivering into the cold dawn, shrugging on his overcoat and frowning. The O'Donovan vegetable truck was just going by, Warren's powerful body relaxed behind the wheel, his coarse working-man's shirt open at the throat. As the cart passed the Warren house, Matt glanced up at the lighted yellow window in the third floor, and then looked down at the doctor hugging his coat about him. He nodded.

"It's a fine morning, Doctor," he called cheerfully, and drove on.

A moment later the doctor heard him begin to whistle loudly, in a sweet shrill treble. He did not recognize the air. He thought of the brilliant future which had lain open before his friend, he remembered his absorbing, crowded successful life, the beginning of his reputation as a brilliant after-dinner speaker, his growing influence in financial circles. And there was his beautiful, faithful wife lost to him. After all, she had been faithful, she had not married again; and his children growing up to be such credits to any family.

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Standing there, cold in the cold dawn, the doctor's heart burned. He said aloud to the empty street, "I *will* go to see that British surgeon. There's no harm in watching him operate."

Four months later he was back in America again. He went straight from the station, where he landed at dusk, to the O'Donovan farmhouse. It was autumn and although not yet 8 o'clock, the first stars were shining in the tranquilly darkening sky. He heard music and stopped to listen. But he was a doctor, no musician, and did not recognize it. He never recognized any but the simpler melodies. This was not simple. In answer to his knock the Irish lad came to the door. When he saw the doctor he stepped back and shut off the music. But when he began to speak the echo of it was still in his dreamy face.

"He's in the garden, sir, but if you'll take a seat I'll step and call him." As the doctor sat down, he explained, "He likes to take one look around before we go to bed. They say around here that he can't sleep unless he's tucked the plants up and given them a pat like. He says, too, he likes to hear the music, with the sky over his head. There's some, he says, that should never be heard except under the stars."

Dr. Farquhar, alone in the small room, crossed his legs. The hanging foot twitched in a recurrent nervous jerk. He looked around him, surprised to see shelves of books. It was extremely quiet there on the side road, so quiet that he could hear the distant murmur of the boy's voice and the man's deeper-toned answer. He could count every step of their return to the house, muffled as they crossed the soft ground of the garden, ringing on the hard road, grating on the gravel of the path. He stepped in, the gardener in his earth-stained blue jeans, and stood there before him, looking down at him quietly.

"Were you wanting to see me, Doctor?" he asked.

The doctor rose, breathing quickly. He faced the other's steady eyes with nervous irritation.

"Yes, yes — I have something important to say to you, Mr. —" He hesitated, balked over the name, used his hesitation as an opening, and said, impatiently, "Of course you know your name is not really O'Donovan."

The gardener turned to the boy loitering at the door and called, "Tim, 'tis time you were in bed." The lad nodded absently, moved obediently towards the stairs. He was humming under his breath the slow air the doctor had heard through the window.

"All right, Uncle," he said good-humoredly, and disappeared.

The gardener sat down. "Something important you say, Doctor?" he asked, a touch of uneasiness in his voice.

The doctor nodded and began to speak rapidly, violently. He had not gone far before the gardener stood up. He shook his head, motioned the

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other to silence. "I'm all right as I am," he said curtly. "There's no use prying into what's — there are things oughtn't to be stirred up — they're better when —"

Dr. Farquhar flew at him in a fury. "Will you listen to me!" Just *listen* to what I have to say! Your very life is at stake. You shall listen!"

The gardener made a gesture of impatience, but he sat down again, frowning. He did not again interrupt the doctor's vehement monologue. Occasionally he rubbed his big palms on his knees. Outside the crickets sang loudly. From upstairs Tim's flute dropped down to them in snatches of a slowly moving adagio.

The doctor's harangue drew to a close. "I have followed your case from the beginning; I am so certain now that I cannot but insist that you place yourself in my hands. When you have come to yourself and realize your lost identity, you will understand and share the intensity of my feeling on this point —" He found he had no breath and stopped, leaning forward toward the gardener. His brows drawn together, he tried to penetrate the other man's expression. It was a strange one. He could not make it out.

The moment seemed right for a pause.

In the room above them the flute's voice had sunk to silence. The crickets had stopped chirping. It was in an intense stillness that the man in the blue jeans looked down at his rough hands, looked up at the doctor. He drew a long breath and said gravely, "Why, Jim, my memory came back more than 8 years ago."

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THE LOOPHOLE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THAT NIGHT, LIKE ALL THE OTHER nights before it, around a quarter to 12 Gary Severn took his hat off the hook nearest the door, turned, and said to his pretty, docile little wife:

"Guess I'll go down to the corner, bring in the midnight edition."

"All right, dear," she nodded, just as she had on all the other nights.

He opened the door, then stood there undecidedly on the threshold. "I feel kind of tired," he yawned, backing a hand to his mouth. "Maybe I ought to skip it. It wouldn't kill me to do without it one night. I usually fall asleep before I can turn to page 2, anyway."

"Then don't bother getting it, dear," she acquiesced. "Let it go if you feel that way. After all, it's not that important."

"No, it isn't, is it?" he admitted. For a moment he seemed about to step inside again and close the door after him. Then he shrugged. "Oh, well," he said, "I may as well go now that I've got my hat on. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." He closed the door from the outside.

Who knows what is important, what isn't important? Who is to recognize the turning-point that turns out to be a trifle, the trifle that becomes a turning-point in a man's life?

A pause at the door, a yawn, a five-cent midnight paper that he wouldn't have remained awake long enough to finish anyway . . .

He came out on the street. Just a man on his way to the corner for a newspaper, and then back again. It was the hundred and eighty-first day of the year, and on 180 other nights before this one he had come out at this same hour, for this same purpose. No, one night there'd been a blizzard and he hadn't. A hundred and seventy-nine nights, then.

He walked down to the corner, turned it, and went one block over the long way, to where the newsstand was located. It was just a wooden trestle set up on the sidewalk, with the papers stacked on it. The tabs were always the first ones out, and they were on it already. But his was a standard-size, and it came out the last of all of them.

The man who kept the stand knew him by his paper, although he didn't know his name or anything else about him. "Not up yet," he greeted him. "Any minute now."

Why is it, when a man has read one particular paper for any length of time, he will refuse to buy another in place of it, even though the same news is in both? Just another trifle?

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Gary Severn said, "I'll take a turn around the block. It'll probably be here by the time I get back."

The delivery trucks left the plant downtown at 11:30, but the paper never hit the stand this far up much before 12, due to a number of variables such as traffic lights and weather which were never the same twice. The paper had often been a little delayed, just as it was tonight.

He went up the next street, the one behind his own, rounded the upper corner, then over, and back into his own again. He swung one hand, kept his other pocketed. He whistled a few inaccurate bars of *Elmer's Tune*. Then a few even more inaccurate bars of *Rose O'Day*. Then he quit whistling. It had just been an expression of the untroubled vacancy of his mind.

His thoughts went something like this: "Swell night. Wonder what star that is up there, that one just hitting the roof? Never did know much about them. That Jerry Colonna sure was funny on the air tonight." With a grin of reminiscent appreciation. "Gee, I'm sleepy. Wish I hadn't come out just now." Things like that.

He'd arrived back at his own doorway from the opposite direction by now. He slackened a little, hesitated, on the point of going in and letting the paper go hang. Then he went on anyway.

"I'm out now. It'll just take a minute longer. There and back." A trifle.

The delivery truck had just arrived. He saw the bale being pitched to the asphalt for the dealer to pick up. By the time he'd arrived at the stand the dealer had hauled it onto the sidewalk, cut the binding, and stacked the papers for sale on his board. A handful of other customers who had been waiting around closed in. The dealer was kept busy handing them papers and making change.

Gary Severn wormed his way in through the little cluster of customers, reached for a copy from the pile, and found that somebody else had taken hold of it at the same time. The slight tug from two different directions brought their eyes around toward one another. Probably neither would have seen the other — that is, to look at squarely — if it hadn't been for that.

It was nothing. Gary Severn said pleasantly, "Go ahead, help yourself," and relinquished that particular copy for the next one below it. "Must think he knows me," passed through his inattentive mind. The other man's glance had come back a second time, whereas his own hadn't.

He paid no further heed. He handed the dealer his nickel, turned and went off, reading the headlines as he went by the aid of the shop lights along the way.

He was dimly aware, as he did, of other footsteps coming along behind him — people who had just bought their papers as he had, and had this same direction to follow. He turned the corner into his own street. All but one pair of footsteps went off the other way, along the avenue, and died out. One pair turned off and

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came up this way, as he had, but he took no notice.

He couldn't read en route any more, because he'd left the lights behind. The paper turned blue and blurred. He folded it and postponed the rest until he should get home.

The other footfalls were still coming along, a few yards back. He didn't look around. Why should he? The streets were free to everyone. Others lived along this street as well as he. Footsteps behind him had no connection with him.

He reached his own doorway. As he turned aside he started to drag out his key. The other steps would go on past him now. Not that his mind was occupied with them. Simply the membranes of his ears. He'd pulled open the street door, had one foot already through to the other side. The footsteps had come abreast.

A hand came down on his shoulder.

"Just a minute."

He turned. It was the man who had been buying a paper, the one who had reached for the same one he had. Was he going to pick a quarrel about such a petty —

"Identify yourself."

"Why?"

"I said identify yourself." He did something with his free hand, almost too quick for Gary Severn to take in its significance. Some sort of a high-sign backed with metal.

"What's that for?"

"That's so you'll identify yourself."

"I'm Gary Severn. I live here."

"All right. You'd better come with me." The hand on his shoulder had shifted farther down his arm now, tightened.

Severn answered with a sort of peaceful doggedness. "Oh, no, I won't go with you unless you tell me what you want with me. You can't come up to me like this outside my house and —"

"You're not resisting arrest, are you?" the other man suggested. "I wouldn't."

"Arrest?" Severn said blankly. Arrest for what?"

A note of laughter came from the other man, without his grim lips curving in accompaniment to it. "I don't have to tell you that, do I? Arrest for murder. Murder of a police officer. In the course of an armed robbery on Farragut Street." He spaced each clipped phrase. "Now do you remember?"

Arrest for murder.

He said it over to himself. It didn't even frighten him. It had no meaning. It was like being mistaken for Willie Sutton or — Some sort of a freak mixup. The thing was, he wouldn't get to bed until all hours now, and that might make him late in the morning. And just when he was so tired, too.

All he could find to say was a foolish little thing. "Can I go inside first and leave my paper? My wife's waiting in there, and I'd like to let her know I may be gone for half an hour or so."

The man nodded permission. "Sure. I'll go inside with you a minute, while you tell your wife."

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A life ends, and the note it ends on is: *Can I go inside first and leave my paper?*

On the wall was a typical optician's sight chart, beginning with a big beetling jumbo capital at the top and diminishing to a line of fingernail-size type at the bottom. The detectives had been occupied in trying themselves out on it while they were waiting.

Most, from a distance of across the room, had had to stop at the fourth line from the bottom. Normal eyesight. One man had been able to get down as far as the third from the bottom, but he'd missed two of the ten letters in that one. No one had been able to get below that.

The door on the opposite side opened and the Novak woman was brought in. She'd brought her knitting.

"Sit down there. We'd like to try you out on this chart first."

Mrs. Novak tipped her shoulders. "Glasses you're giving out?"

"How far down can you read?"

"All the way."

"Can you read the bottom line?"

Again Mrs. Novak tipped her shoulders. "Who couldn't?"

"Nine out of ten people couldn't," one of the detectives murmured to the man next to him.

She rattled it off like someone reading a headline — "p,t,b,k,j,h,i, y,q,a."

Somebody whistled. "Far-sighted."

She dropped her eyes complacently to her needles again. "This I don't know about. I only hope you gentlemen'll be through soon. While you got me coming in and out of here, my business ain't getting my whole attention."

The door opened and Gary Severn came in. Flanked. His whole life was flanked now.

The rest of it went quickly. The way death sometimes does.

She looked up, held it, nodded. "That's him. That's the man I saw running away right after the shots."

Gary Severn didn't say anything.

One of the detectives present — his name was Rogers — didn't say anything either. He was just there, a witness to it.

The name of the other chief witness was Storm. He was a certified accountant, dealt in figures. He was, as witnesses go, a man of good will. He read the second line from the bottom on the chart better than any of the detectives had, even if not as good as Mrs. Novak. But then he was wearing glasses.

But he'd also been wearing them at the time the fleeing murderer had bowled him over on the sidewalk, only a few doors away from the crime, and snapped a shot at him which had miraculously missed. Storm had promptly lain inert and feigned death, to avoid a second and better-aimed shot.

"You realize how important this is?" they asked him.

"I realize. That's why I'm holding back. That's why I don't like to say

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I'm 100 per cent sure. I'd say I'm 75 per cent sure that it's him."

"What you'd like to say," he was cautioned, "has nothing to do with it. Either you are sure or you aren't. Sureness has no percentages. Either it's 100 or it's zero. Keep emotion out of this. Forget that it's a man. You're an accountant. It's a column of figures to you. There's only one right answer. Give us that answer. Now we're going to try you again."

Gary Severn came in again.

Storm moved his figures up. "Ninety per cent sure," he said privately to the lieutenant standing behind him. "I still got 10 per cent doubt left."

"*Yes* or *no*?"

"I can't say no, when I got 90 per cent on the 'yes' side and only —"

"*YES* or *NO!*"

It came slowly, but it came. "Yes."

Gary Severn didn't make a sound. He'd stopped saying anything long ago. Just the sound of one's own voice, unheard, unanswered — what good was that?

The detective named Rogers was in the background again. He just took it in like the rest. There was nothing he felt called on to say.

The newsdealer — his name was Mike Mosconi — sat in jackknife position in the chair and moved his hat uneasily around in his hands while he told them:

"No, I don't know his name and I'm not even sure which house he lives in, but I know him by sight as good as you can know anybody, and he's telling the truth about that. He hasn't missed buying a paper off me, I don't think more than once or twice in the whole year."

"But he did stay away once or twice," the lieutenant said. "And what about this twenty-second of June? Is that one of those once or twices he stayed away?"

The newsdealer said unhappily. "I'm out there on the street every night in the year, gents. It's hard for me to pick out a certain night by the date and say for sure that that was the one out of all of 'em — but if you get me the weather for that night, I can do better for you."

"Get him the weather for that night," the lieutenant consented.

The weather came back. "It was clear and bright on the twenty-second of June."

"Then he bought his paper from me that night," Mike Mosconi said inflexibly. "It's the God's honest truth. I'm sure of it and you can be, too. The only one or two times he didn't show up was when —"

"How long did it take him to buy his paper each time?" the lieutenant continued remorselessly.

Mike Mosconi looked down reluctantly. "How long does it take to buy a paper? You drop five cents, you pick up your paper, you walk away —"

"But there's something else you haven't told us. At what time each night did he do this quick little buying of the paper? Was it the same time always, or did it vary?"

Mike Mosconi looked up in innocent surprise. "It was the same time

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always. It never varied. How could it? He always gets the midnight edition of the *Herald-Times*. It never hits my stand until a quarter to 12 — he never came out until then. He knew it wouldn't be there if he did."

"The twenty-second of June?"

"Any night, I don't care which it was. If he came at all, he came between quarter of and 12 o'clock."

"You can go, Mosconi."

Mosconi went. The lieutenant turned to Gary Severn.

"The murder was at 10 o'clock. What kind of an alibi was that?"

Severn said in quiet resignation, "The only one I had. . . ."

Gates didn't look like a criminal. But then there is no typical criminal look. The public at large only thinks there is. He was a big, husky, black-haired man who gave a misleading impression of slow-moving genial good-nature totally unwarranted by the known facts of his career. He also had an air of calm self-assurance that came more from a lack of imagination than anything else.

He said: "So what do you expect me to say? If I say no, this ain't the guy, that means *I* was there, but with someone else. If I say yes, it is him, that means the same thing. Don't worry — Mr. Strassburger, my counsel, wised me up about the kind of trick questions you guys like to ask. Like when they want to know, 'Have you quit beating your wife?' "

He looked them over with self-possession.

"All I'm saying is, I wasn't there myself. So if I wasn't there myself, how can there be a right guy or a wrong guy that was there with me? *I'm* the wrong guy, more than anybody else." He tapped himself on the breast-bone with emphatic conviction. "Get the right guy in my place first, and then he'll give you the right second guy." He smiled a little at them. "All I'm saying, now and at any other time is — I never saw this guy before in my life. If you want it that way, you can have it."

The lieutenant smiled back at him. "And you weren't on Farragut Street that night? You didn't take part in the murder of Sergeant O'Neill?"

"That," said Gates with steely confidence, "goes with it."

Gates got up, not fast or jerkily, but with the same slowness that always characterized him. He wiped the sweat off his palms by running them lightly down his sides. As though he were going to shake hands with somebody.

He was. He was going to shake hands with death.

He wasn't particularly frightened. Not that he was particularly brave. It was just that he didn't have much imagination. Rationalizing, he knew that he wasn't going to be alive ten minutes from now. Yet he wasn't used to casting his imagination ten minutes ahead; he'd always kept it in the present.

Yet he was troubled by something else. The ridges in his forehead showed that.

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"Are you ready, my son?"

"I'm ready."

"Lean on me."

"I don't have to, Father. My legs'll hold up. It ain't far." It was made as a simple statement of fact, without sarcasm or rebuke intended.

They left the death cell.

"Listen — that Severn kid," Gates said in a quiet voice, looking straight ahead. "He's following me in five minutes. I admit I did it. I held out until now, to see if I'd get a reprieve. I didn't get the reprieve, so it don't matter now any more. All right, I killed O'Neill. I admit it. But the other guy, the guy with me that helped me kill him, it wasn't Severn. Are you listening? Can you hear me? It was a guy named Donny Blake. I never saw Severn before in my life until they arrested him. For God's sake, tell them that, Father! All right, I'm sorry for swearing at such a time. But tell them that, Father! You've got to tell them that! There's only five minutes left."

"Why did you wait so long, my son?"

"I told you, the reprieve — I been telling the warden since last night. I think he believes me, but I don't think he can get them to do anything about it. The others, over him — Listen, *you* tell him, Father! You believe me, don't you? The dead don't lie!"

His voice rose, echoed hollowly in the short passage. "Tell them not to touch that kid! He's not the guy that was with me!"

And then he said what was probably the strangest thing ever said by a condemned man on the way to execution. "Father, don't walk any farther with me! Leave me now, don't waste time. Go tell the warden."

"Pray, my son. Pray for yourself. You are my charge."

"But I don't need you, Father. Can't you take this off my mind? Don't let them bring that kid in here after me!"

"Yes, my son." No need to tell the doomed man that Gary Severn had already preceded him into death.

Something cold touched the crown of the priest's head. His arm slowly drew away.

"Don't forget what you promised me, Father. Don't let them —" And then, in a tired voice, "Helen, I love you. I —"

The hood, falling over his face, cut the rest of it short.

The current waned, then waxed, then waned again. . . .

They didn't have the chart on the wall any more. It had done them poor service. The door opened and Mrs. Novak was ushered in. She had her knitting with her again. Only she was making a different article, of a different color, this time. She nodded restrainedly to several of them, as one does to distant acquaintances encountered before.

She sat down, bent her head, and the needles began to flicker busily.

Somebody came in, or went out. She didn't bother looking.

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The toecaps of a pair of shoes came to a halt just within the radius of her downcast eyes. They remained motionless on the floor, as though silently importuning her attention.

Mrs. Novak became aware of the shoes. She raised her eyes indifferently, dropping them. Then they shot up again. The knitting sidled from her lap as the lap itself dissolved into a straight line. The ball of yarn rolled across the floor unnoticed. She was clutching at her own throat with both hands.

There wasn't a sound in the room.

She pointed with one trembling finger. It was a question, a plea that she be mistaken, but more than anything else a terrified statement of fact.

"It's him — the man that ran past by my store — from where the police officer —"

"But the last time you said —"

She rolled her eyes, struck her own forehead. "I know," she said brokenly. "He looked *like* him. But he only looked *like* him, you understand? This one, it *is* him!" Her voice railed out at them accusingly. "Why'd you have to bring me here that other time? If you don't, I don't make such a mistake!"

"There were others made the same mistake," the lieutenant tried to soothe her. "You were only one of five or six witnesses. Every one of them —"

She wouldn't listen. Her face crinkled into an ugly mask. Suddenly tears were working their way down its seams. Somebody took her by the arm to help her out of the room. One of the detectives had to pick up the fallen knitting, hand it back to her, otherwise she would have left without it.

"I killed him!" she moaned.

"It wasn't you alone," the lieutenant acknowledged bitterly as he led her from the room. "We all did."

After Mrs. Novak had gone they seated Donny Blake in a chair and one of them stood directly behind it. They handed this man a newspaper and he opened it and held it spread out before Blake's face, as though he were holding it up for him to read.

The door opened and closed, and Storm, the accountant, was sitting there across the room, in the exact place the Novak woman had been just a few minutes before.

He looked around at them questioningly, still unsure of just why he had been summoned here. All he saw was a group of detectives, one of them buried behind a newspaper.

"Keep looking where that newspaper is," the lieutenant instructed quietly.

Storm did so.

The detective behind the chair slowly began to raise the paper, like a curtain. Blake's chin appeared first. Then his mouth. Then nose, eyes, forehead. At last his whole face was revealed.

Storm's own face whitened. His reaction was quieter than the woman's, but just as dramatic. He began to

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tremble as he sat there in the chair.

"Oh, my God!" he mouthed in a sickened undertone.

"Have you anything to say?" the lieutenant urged. "Don't be afraid to say it."

Storm stroked his mouth as though the words tasted rotten even before they'd come out. "That — that's the face of the man I collided with — on Farragut Street."

"You're sure?"

His figures came back to him, but it was plain they gave him no comfort any longer. "One hundred per cent!" he said dismally, leaning way over his own lap as though he had a cramp . . .

"They're not altogether to blame," the lieutenant commented to a couple of his men after the room had been cleared. "It's hard, when a guy looks a good deal like another, not to bridge the remaining gap with your own imagination. Another thing, the mere fact that we were already holding Severn in custody would unconsciously influence them in identifying him. We thought he was the guy, and we ought to know, so if we thought he was, he probably was. I don't mean they consciously thought of it in that way, but without their realizing it, that would be the effect on them."

A cop looked in, said, "They've got Blake ready for you, Lieutenant."

"And I'm ready for him," the lieutenant answered grimly, turning and leading the way out.

The doctor came forward, tipped up one of Blake's eyelids. Sightless white showed. He took out a stethoscope and applied it to the region of the heart.

In silence, panting breaths reverberated hollowly against the basement walls. The doctor straightened up, removed the stethoscope.

"Not much more," he warned in a guarded undertone. "Still okay, but he's wearing down. This is just a faint. Want him back?"

"Yeah," one of the men said. "We wouldn't mind."

The doctor extracted a small vial from his kit, extended it toward Blake's nose. He passed it back and forth in a straight line a couple of times.

Blake's eyelids flickered up. Then he twitched his head away uncomfortably.

There was a concerted forward shift on the part of all of them, like a pack of dogs closing in on a bone.

"Wait'll the doc gets out of the room," the lieutenant checked them. "This is our own business."

Donny Blake began to weep. "No, I can't stand any more!" He called out frantically, "Doc! Doc! Don't leave me in here with 'em!"

The doctor had scant sympathy for him.

"Then why don't you tell 'em what they want to know?" he grunted. "Why waste everyone's time?" He closed the door after him.

Maybe because the suggestion came from an outsider, or maybe because this really was the time for it anyway . . .

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Suddenly Blake said, "Yeah, it was me. I did it. I was with Gates and the two of us killed O'Neill. He horned in on us in the middle of this diamond job we were pulling. He didn't see me. I came up behind him while he was holding Gates at the point of his gun. I pinned him to the wall there in the entrance and we took his gun away from him. Then Gates said 'He's seen us now,' and shot him down before I could stop him. I said, 'He's still alive — he'll tell anyway,' and I finished him off with one in the head."

He covered his face with palsied hands. "Now I've given it to you. Lemme alone!"

"See who that is," the lieutenant said.

A cop was on the other side of the door when it was opened. "The D.A.'s office is on the phone for you, Lieutenant. Upstairs in your office."

"Get the stenographer," the lieutenant said. "I'll be right back."

He was gone a considerable time, but he must have used up most of it in the slow, lifeless way in which he came back. Dawdling along. He came in with a funny look on his face, as though he didn't see them any more. Or rather, he did, but hated to have to look at them now.

"Take him out," he said curtly.

No one said anything until the prisoner was gone. Then they all looked at the lieutenant curiously, waiting for him to speak. He didn't.

"Aren't you going to have it taken down, Lieutenant, while it's still flowing free and easy?"

"No," the lieutenant said, tight-lipped.

"But he'll seal up again, if we give him time to rest."

"We're not going to have a chance to use it, so there's no need getting it out of him." He sank deflatedly onto the chair in which the prisoner had been propped. "He's not going to be brought to trial. Those are the orders I just got. The D.A.'s office says to turn him loose."

He let the commotion eddy unheard above his head for a while.

Finally someone asked bitterly, "What is it? Politics?"

"No. Not altogether, anyway. True, it's an election year, and that may play a part, but there's a lot more involved than that. Here's how they lined it up to me. Severn has been executed for that crime. There's no way of bringing him back. The mistake's been made, and it's irretrievable. To bring this guy to trial now will unleash a scandal that will affect not only the D.A.'s office but the whole Police Department.

"It's not only their own skins, or ours, they're thinking of. It's the confidence of the public. It'll get a shock that it won't recover from for years to come. I guess they feel they would rather have one guilty criminal walk out scot-free than bring about a condition where, for the next few years, every time the law tries to execute a criminal in this state, there'll be a hue and cry raised that it's another miscarriage of justice like the Severn case. They won't be able

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to get any convictions in our courts. All a smart defense lawyer will have to do is mention the name of Severn, and the jury will automatically acquit the defendant, rather than take a chance. It's a case of letting one criminal go now, or losing dozens of others in the future."

He got up with a sigh. "I've got to go up now and get him to sign a waiver."

The handful of men stood around for a minute or two longer. Each one reacted to it according to his own individual temperament. One, of a practical turn of mind, shrugged it off.

"Well," he said, "it's not up to us. Coming, Joe?"

Another, of a legalistic turn of mind, began to point out just why the D.A.'s office had all the wrong dope.

One by one they drifted out. Until there was just one left behind. The detective named Rogers. He stayed on alone after all the rest had gone. Hands cupped in pockets, staring down at the floor, while he stood motionless.

His turn of mind? That of a zealot who has just seen his cause betrayed.

They met in the main corridor at headquarters a few hours later — the detective and the murderer who was already a free man, immune, on his way back to the outer world.

Rogers just stood there against the wall as Blake went by. His head slowly turned, pacing the killer's passage as their paths crossed. Not a word was exchanged between them. Blake had a strip of plaster alongside his nose, another dab of it under his lip. But Gary Severn was dead. And so was Police Sergeant O'Neill.

The little things about Blake hurt even worse. The untrammeled swing of his arms. The fastidious pinch he was giving his necktie knot. He was back in life again, full-blast.

He met the detective's eyes arrogantly, turning his own head to maintain the stare between them unbroken. Then he gave a derisive chuckle deep in his throat. It was more eloquent, more insulting than any number of words could have been. "Hah!" it said. "The police — hah! Their laws and regulations — hah! Murder — hah!"

It was like a blow in the face. It smarted. It stung. It hurt Rogers where his beliefs lay. His sense of right and wrong. His sense of justice. All those things that people — some of them, anyway — have, and don't like to let on they have.

Rogers's face went white. Not all over. Just around the mouth and chin. The other man strutted on. Along the short remainder of the corridor, and out through the glass doors, and down the steps out of sight. Rogers stood there without moving, and his eyes followed him to the bitter end, until Blake was gone, and there was nothing more to look at.

He'd never be brought back for that particular crime.

Rogers turned and walked swiftly down the other way. He came to a

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door, his lieutenant's door, and he pushed it open without knocking and went in. He put his hand down flat on the desk, then took it away again.

The lieutenant looked down at the badge left lying there, then up at him.

"My written resignation will follow later. I'm quitting." He turned and went back to the door again.

"Rogers, come back here. Now wait a minute — you must be crazy."

"Maybe I am a little, at that," Rogers admitted.

"Come back here, will you? Where you going?"

"Wherever Blake is, that's where I'll be from now on. Wherever he goes, that's where you'll find me."

The door closed softly, and he was gone.

Rogers said to a cop standing on the front steps: "Which way'd he go?"

"He walked down a ways, then got in a cab down there by the corner. There it is — you can still see it up ahead, waiting for that light to change."

Rogers summoned another cab.

"Where to, Chief?"

"See that cab crossing the intersection up there ahead? Just go whichever way that goes, from now on."

Hours later, in a hotel lobby, Blake left the blonde with him at the desk and came slowly and purposefully across the lobby toward the overstuffed chair into which Rogers had just sunk down. He stopped squarely in front of him, legs slightly a-straddle.

"Why don't you get wise to yourself? Was the show good? Was the rest'runt good? Maybe you think I don't know your face from that rat-incubator downtown. Maybe you think I haven't seen you all night long, every place where I was."

Rogers answered quietly, looking up at him, "What makes you think I've been trying for you not to see me?"

Blake was at a loss for a moment. He opened his mouth, closed it again, swallowed. "You can't get me on that O'Neill rap. You guys wouldn't have let me go in the first place, if you could have held me on it, and you know it! It's finished, water under the bridge!"

Rogers said quietly, "I know I can't. I agree with you there. What makes you think I'm trying to?"

Again Blake opened and closed his mouth. The best answer he could find was, "I don't know what you're up to, but you won't get anywhere."

"What makes you think I'm trying to get anywhere?"

Blake blinked and looked more at a loss than ever. After an awkward moment, he turned on his heel and went back to the desk.

He conferred with the blonde for a few minutes. She began to draw away from him. Finally she shrugged off the hand he tried to put on her arm. Her voice rose. "Not if you're being shadowed — count me out! I ain't going to get mixed up with you. You

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should have told me sooner." She flounced indignantly out.

Blake gave Rogers the venomous look of a beady-eyed cobra. Then he strode ragingly off in the opposite direction, entered the waiting elevator.

Rogers motioned languidly to the operator to wait for him, straightened up from his chair, ambled leisurely over, and stepped in. The car started up with the two of them in it. Blake's face was livid with rage. A pulse at his temple kept beating a tattoo.

"Keep it up," he said in a strangled undertone behind the operator's back.

"Keep what up?" answered Rogers impassively.

The car stopped at the sixth floor and Blake flung himself off. The door closed behind him. He made a turn of the carpeted corridor, stopped, put his key into a door. Then he whirled savagely as a second padded tread came down the corridor in the wake of his own.

"Where d'ya think you're going?" he shrilled exasperatedly. "Right inside my room with me?"

"No," Rogers said evenly, putting a key to the door directly opposite. "Into my own."

The two doors closed one after the other.

That was at midnight, on the sixth floor of the Congress Hotel. When Blake came out again, at 10 the next morning, all freshly combed and shaven, to go down to breakfast, it was from a room on the tenth floor of the Hotel Colton. He'd changed in the middle of the night. As he came out he was smiling to himself. He closed the door and moved down the corridor toward the elevator.

The second door from his own, on the same side, opened a moment or two after he'd gone by, before he'd quite reached the turn of the hall. Something made him glance back — maybe the fact that the door hadn't immediately closed again.

Rogers was standing sidewise in it, back to the door frame, looking out after him while he unhurriedly completed hitching on his coat.

"Hold the car for me a sec, will you?" he said matter-of-factly. "I'm on my way down to breakfast myself. . . ."

On the third try Blake managed to bring the cup up to its highest level yet, within an inch of his lips, but he still couldn't seem to manage that remaining inch. The cup started to slosh over at the sides. Finally it sank heavily down again, with a crack that nearly broke the saucer under it, as though it were too heavy for him to hold.

Rogers, sitting facing him, two tables away but in a straight line, went ahead enjoyably and calmly mangling a large dish of bacon and eggs. He grinned with a full mouth.

Blake's wrists continued to tremble, even without the cup to support. "I can't stand it," he muttered, shading his eyes for a minute. "Does he have to —" Then he checked the remark.

The waiter, mopping up the place

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before him, let his eye travel around the room without understanding. "Is there something here that bothers you, sir?"

"Yes," Blake said in a choked voice, "there is."

"Would you care to sit over this way, sir?"

Blake got up and moved around to the opposite side of the table, with his back to Rogers. The waiter refilled his cup.

He started to lift it again, using both hands this time to make sure of keeping it steady.

He couldn't see Rogers any more, but he could still hear him. The peculiar crackling, grating sound caused by a person chomping on dry toast reached him from the direction in which he had last seen the man. It continued incessantly after that, without pause, as though the consumer had no sooner completed one mouthful than he filled up another and went to work on that.

The cup sank down heavily, as if it weighed too much for him to support even in his double grasp. This time it overturned, and a tan puddle spread over the table. Blake leaped to his feet, flung his napkin down, elbowed the solicitous waiter roughly aside.

"Lemme out of here!" he panted. "I can still feel him, every move I make, watching me from behind!"

The waiter looked around, perplexed. To his eyes there was no one in sight but a quiet, inoffensive man a couple of tables off, minding his own business, attending strictly to what was on the plate before him, not doing anything to disturb anyone.

"Gee, you better see a doctor, mister," he suggested worriedly. "You haven't been able to sit through a meal in days now."

Blake floundered out of the dining room, across the lobby, and into the drugstore on the opposite side. He drew up short at the fountain, leaned helplessly against it with a haggard look on his face.

"Gimme an aspirin!" His voice frayed. "Two of them, three of them!"

"Century Limited — Ca-a-awgo Track Twenty-five!" boomed dismally through the vaulted rotunda. It filtered in, thinned a little, through the crack in the telephone booth panel that Blake was holding fractionally ajar.

He stayed in the booth and the phone stayed on the hook. He'd picked the booth for its strategic location. It not only commanded the clock out there, but more important it commanded the wicket leading down to that particular track that he was to use, and above all, the prospective passengers who filed through it.

He was going to be the last one on that train — the last possible one — and he was going to know just who had preceded him aboard before he committed himself to it.

It was impossible, with all the precautions he had taken, that that devil in human form should sense the distance he was about to put between

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them once and for all. If he came after him this time, then he was a mind-reader, pure and simple. There would be no other way to explain it.

It had been troublesome and expensive, but if it succeeded, it would be worth it. The several unsuccessful attempts he had made to change hotels had shown him the futility of that type of disappearance. This time he hadn't made the mistake of asking for his final bill, packing his belongings, or anything like that. His clothes, such as they were, were still in the closet. His bags were still empty. He'd paid his bill for a week in advance, and this was only the second day of that week.

He'd given no notice of departure. He'd strolled casually forth as on any other day, sauntered into a movie, left immediately by another entrance, and come over here. He'd picked up the reservation they'd been holding for him under another name, and closeted himself in this phone booth. He'd been in it for the past three-quarters of an hour.

And his Nemesis, meanwhile, was either loitering around outside that theater waiting for him to come out, or sitting back there at the hotel waiting for him to return.

He scanned the passengers as they filed through — now one, now two or three at once, now one more again, now a brief let-up.

The minute hand was beginning to hit train time. The guard was getting ready to close the gate. Nobody else was passing through any more now.

He opened the booth door, took a tight tug on his hat-brim, and poised himself for a sudden dash across the marble floor.

He waited until the latticed gate was stretched all the way across, ready to be latched onto the opposite side of the gateway. Then he flashed from the booth and streaked over toward it.

"Hold it!" he barked, and the guard widened it again just enough for him to squeeze through sideways.

On the inside of the gate, after it was already made fast, Blake showed his ticket. He looked watchfully out and around, and there was no sign of anyone starting up from a hidden position in the waiting rooms and coming after him.

He wasn't here! He'd lost him, given him the slip.

"Better make it fast, mister," the guard suggested.

He didn't have to be told that. The train didn't exist that could get away from him now, even if he had to run halfway through the tunnel after it.

He went tearing down the ramp, wigwagging a line of returning redcaps out of his way.

He got on only by virtue of a conductor's outstretched arm, a door left aslant to receive him, and a last-minute flourish of tricky footwork. He got on, and that was the only thing that mattered.

"That's it!" he sighed with relief. "Now close it up and throw the key away! There's nobody else, after me."

"They'd have to be homing pigeons

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riding a tail-wind, if there was," the conductor admitted.

He'd taken a compartment, to make sure of remaining unseen during the trip. It was two cars up, and after he'd reached it and checked it with the conductor, he locked himself in and pulled down the shade to the bottom, even though they were still in the tunnel under the city.

Then he sank back on the upholstered seat. Finally! A complete break at last.

"He'll never catch up with me again as long as I live," he murmured bitterly. "I'll see to that."

Time and trackage ticked off.

They stopped for a minute at the uptown station. There was little hazard attached to that, he felt. If he'd guessed his tormentor's intentions at all, the fellow would have been right at his heels at the main station. Still, there was nothing like being sure. So after they were well under way again, he rang for the conductor, opened the door a half-inch, and asked him through it:

"I'm expecting to meet somebody. Did anyone get on just now, uptown?"

"Just a lady and a little boy. That who —"

"No," said Blake, smiling serenely, "that wasn't who." And he locked the door again. All set now.

Sure, he'd come out there after him maybe, but all he, Blake, needed was this head start. That bloodhound would never be able to close in on him again. He'd keep that head start between them from now on, always a step ahead.

They stopped again at Harmon to change to a coal-powered engine. That didn't bother him. That wasn't a passenger stop.

There was a knock on his compartment door when they were opposite West Point, and dread came back again for a moment. He leaped over and put his ear to the door, and when the knock came again, called out tensely, making a shell of his two hands to alter his voice: "Who is it?"

A porter's voice came back. "Care for a pillow, sir?"

He opened it narrowly, let the pillow be handed in to him more to get rid of the porter than because he wanted it. Then he locked up again, relaxed.

He wasn't disturbed any more after that. At Albany they turned west. Somewhere in Pennsylvania, or maybe it was in Ohio, he rang for a tray and had it put down outside the locked door. Then he took it in himself and locked up again. When he was through he put the tray outside, and locked his door once more. That was so he wouldn't have to go out to the buffet-car.

But these were just fancy trimmings, little extra precautions, that he himself knew to be no longer necessary. The train was obviously empty of danger. It had been from the moment of departure.

Toward midnight, way out in Indiana, he had to let the porter in to make up the two seats into a bed.

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"I guess you the las' one up on the whole train," the man said cheerfully.

"They all turned in?"

"Hours ago. Ain't nobody stirrin' no mo', from front to back."

That decided him. He figured he might as well step outside for a minute and stretch his legs, while the man was busy in there. He made his way back through sleeping aisles of green berth hangings. Even the observation car was empty and unlighted now, with just one small dim lamp standing guard in the corner.

The whole living cargo of humanity was fast asleep.

He opened the door and went out on the observation platform to get a breath of air. He stretched himself there by the rail and drank it in. "Gee," he thought, "it feels good to be free!" It was the first real taste of freedom he'd had since he'd walked out of Police Headquarters.

A voice in one of the gloom-obscured basket-shaped chairs said mildly: "That you, Blake? Been wondering when you'd show up. How can you stand it, cooped up for hours in that stuffy two-by-four?" And a cigar butt, which was all that could be seen of the speaker, glowed red with comfortable tranquillity.

Blake had to hang onto the rail as he whirled, to keep from going over. "When did you get on?" he wailed.

"I was the first one on," Rogers's voice said from the dark. "I got myself admitted before the gates were even opened, while they were still making up the train." He chuckled appreciatively. "I thought sure you were going to miss it. . . ."

Rogers knew what was coming next. It had been bound to come sooner or later, and this was about the time for it now. Any number of things were there to tell him — minor variations in the pattern of his adversary's behavior. Not for nothing had he been a detective for years. He knew human nature.

He was already familiar with Blake's behavior pattern. The danger signals studding it tonight were, to his practiced eye, as plainly to be read as lighted buoys flashing out above dark, treacherous waters.

Blake hadn't sought one of his usual tinseled, boisterous resorts tonight. He'd found his way instead to a dingy out-of-the-way rathole over on Chicago's South Side, where the very atmosphere had a furtive cast to it. The detective could scent "trap" a mile away as he pushed inside after his quarry.

Blake was sitting alone, not expansively lording it over a cluster of girls as he usually did. He even discouraged the one or two who attempted to attach themselves to him. And finally, the very way in which he drank told the detective there was something coming up. He wasn't drinking to get happy, or to forget. He was drinking to get nerve. The detective could read what was on his mind by the very hoists of his arm. They were too jerky and unevenly spaced, they vibrated with nervous tension.

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He himself sat across the room, fooling around with a beer, not taking any chances on letting it past his gums, in case it had been drugged. He had a gun on him, but that was only because he always carried one. He had absolutely no intention of using it, not even in self-defense.

Because what was coming up now was a test, and it had to be met, to keep the dominance of the situation on his side. If he flinched from it, the dominance of the situation shifted over to Blake's side. And mastery didn't lie in any use of a gun, because that was a mastery that lasted only as long as your finger rested on the trigger. What Rogers was after was a long-term mastery.

Blake was primed now. The liquor had done all it could for him. Rogers saw him get slowly up from the table. Blake braced himself at it a moment, then started on his way out. The very way he walked, the stiff-legged, interlocking gait, showed that this was the come-on, that for whoever followed him now, there was death at the end of it.

Rogers kept himself relaxed. That was important, that was half the battle — otherwise it wouldn't work. He let Blake get as far as the door, then slowly got to his feet in turn. In his technique there was no attempt to give the impression he was *not* following Blake. Rogers threw down money for his beer, and put out his cigar with painstaking thoroughness.

The door had closed behind Blake. Rogers moved toward it. He came out, and Blake had remained in sight, to continue the come-on. As soon as he saw Rogers, he drifted down an alley at the end of the building that led back to the garage. And that was where it was going to happen. And then into a sack, and into one of the cars, and into Lake Michigan.

Without a moment's hesitation, Rogers went down that way, and turned the corner.

Blake had switched on the lights in the garage, to show him the way. He had got rid of the attendant. He went deeper inside but remained visible down the lane of cars. He stopped there, near the back wall, turned to face Rogers, and stood and waited.

Rogers came on down the alley toward the garage entrance. If Blake were going to get him from a distance, then Rogers knew he would probably have to die. But if he let him come in close —

Blake made no move, so he wasn't going to try to get him from a distance. Probably afraid of missing him.

The time limit that Blake must have arranged with the denizens of the rathole expired as Rogers crossed the threshold of the garage. There was suddenly a blare of the three-piece band, from within the main building, so loud it seemed to split the seams of the place. That was the cover-up.

Rogers pulled the corrugated tin sliding door across after him, closing the two of them in.

"That how you want it, Blake?"

Then he came away from the en-

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trance, and walked still deeper into the garage, to where Blake was waiting for him.

Blake had his gun out now. Above it was a face that could only have been that of a man who had been hounded unendurably for weeks on end. Its expression was past hatred.

Rogers came on until he was three or four yards from him. Then he stopped, empty-handed. "Well?" he said. He rested one hand on the fender of the car.

A flux of uncertainty wavered over Blake.

Rogers said, "Go ahead, you fool. This is as good a way as any other, as far as we're concerned. As long as it hands you over to us, I'm willing. This is just what we've been looking for all along. What's the difference if it's me or somebody else?"

"You won't know about it," Blake said in a hoarse voice. "They'll never find you."

"They don't have to. All they've got to do is find you *without me*." He heeled his palms toward him. "Well, what're you waiting for? I'm empty-handed."

The uncertainty came back again, rinsed all the starch out of Blake, softened him up. It bent the gun down floorward. "So you're a plant — so they want me to do this to you. I mighta known."

For a moment or two he was in awful shape. He backed his hand to his forehead and stood there bandy-legged against the wall.

He'd found out long ago he couldn't escape from his tormentor. And now he was finding out he couldn't even kill him. He had to live with him.

Rogers rested his elbow in his other hand and stroked the lower part of his face, contemplating the man thoughtfully. He'd met the test and licked it. Dominance still rested with him.

The two men faced each other — the hunter and the hunted . . .

Rogers sat on the edge of his bed, in the dark, in his room. He was in trousers, undershirt, and with his shoes off. He was sitting the night through, keeping the death watch. This was the same night as the showdown in the garage, or what there was left of it. It was still dark, but it wouldn't be dark much longer.

He'd left his room door open two inches, and was sitting in line with it, patiently watching and waiting. The pattern of human behavior told him what to be on the lookout for next.

The door opening let a slender bar of yellow in from the hall. First it lay flat across the floor, then it climbed up the bed he was on, then it slanted off across his upper arm, just like a chevron. He felt entitled to a chevron by now.

He sat there, looking patiently out through the door slit, waiting. For the inevitable next step, the step that was bound to come. He'd been sitting there like that, watching, ever since he'd first come in.

He was willing to sit up all night, he was so sure it was coming.

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He'd seen the bellboy go in the other room, with the first pint and the cracked ice, stay a minute or two, come out again tossing up a quarter.

Now suddenly the bellboy was back again, with a second pint and more cracked ice. The green of his uniform showed in the door slit. He stood there with his back to Rogers and knocked lightly on the door across the way.

Two pints would do it. Rogers didn't move, though.

The door opened and the boy went in. He came out again in a moment, closed it after him.

Then Rogers moved. He left the bed in his stocking feet, widened his own door, went "Psst!" and the boy came over to him.

"How much did he give you this time?"

The boy's eyes shone. "The whole change that was left! He cleaned himself out!"

Rogers nodded to himself. "How drunk is he?"

"He's getting there," the boy said.

Rogers nodded again. "Lemme have your passkey," he said. "I know you carry one at night."

The boy hesitated.

"It's all right. I have the house dick's authorization. You can check with him, if you want. Only hand it over. I'm going to need it, and there won't be much time."

The boy gave it to him, then showed an inclination to hang around and watch.

"You don't need to wait. I'll take care of everything."

He didn't go back into his own room. He stayed outside that other door just as he was, in undershirt and stockinged feet, passkey ready at hand.

The transom was imperfectly closed, and he could hear Blake moving around in there, occasionally striking against some piece of furniture. He could hear it every time the bottle told off against the rim of the glass.

Pretty soon now. And in between, footsteps faltering back and forth, weaving aimlessly around, like those of someone trying to find his way out of a trap.

Suddenly the bottle hit the carpet with a thud. No more in it.

Any minute now.

A rambling, disconnected phrase or two became audible, as the tempo of the trapped footsteps accelerated, this way and that, and all around, in blundering search of a way out.

"I'll fool him! I'll show him! There's one place he can't come after me —"

There was the sound of a window going up.

Now!

Rogers plunged the passkey in, swept the door aside, and dived across the room.

Blake had both feet on the window sill, ready to go out and over and down. All the way down to the bottom. The only thing still keeping him was that he had to lower his head and shoulders first, to get them

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clear of the upper pane. That gave Rogers time enough to get across to him.

His arms scissored open for him, closed again, like a pair of pliers. He caught him around the waist, pulled him back, and the two of them fell to the floor together in a mingled heap.

Rogers extricated himself and regained his feet before Blake did. He closed and latched the window, drew the shade. Then he went back to where the other man still lay, and stood over him.

"Get up!" he ordered roughly.

Blake had his face buried in the crook of one arm. Rogers gave him a nudge with his foot that was just short of a kick.

Blake drew himself up slowly, crawled back to his feet by ascending stages, using the seat of a chair, then the top of a table next to it, until finally he was erect.

They faced one another.

"You won't let me live, and you won't let me die!" Blake's voice rose almost to a scream. "Then whaddya *after?* Whaddya *want?*"

"Nothing." Rogers's response was almost inaudible. "I've told you that many times, haven't I? Is there any harm in going around where you go, being around where you are? There's plenty of room for two, isn't there?"

Rogers pushed him back on the bed, and Blake lay there sprawled full-length, without attempting to rise again. Rogers took a towel and drenched it in cold water, then wound it into a rope.

He laced it across Blake's face a couple of times, trailing a fine curtain of spray through the air after it. Then he flung it down.

When he spoke again his voice had slowed still further, to a drawl. "Take it easy. What's there to get all steamed up about? Here, look this over."

He reached into his rear trouser pocket, took out a billfold, extracted a worn letter and spread it open, holding it up for Blake to see. It was old, for he'd been carrying it around with him for months. It was an acknowledgment, on a Police Department letterhead, of his resignation. He held it a long time, to let the words sink in. Then he finally put it away again.

Blake quit sniveling after a while, and was carried off on a tide of alcohol into oblivion.

Rogers made no move to leave the room.

He gave the latched window a glance. Then he scuffed over a chair and sat down beside the bed. He lit a cigarette, and just sat there watching. Like a male nurse on duty at the bedside of a patient.

He wanted Blake alive, and he wanted him in his right mind.

Hatred cannot remain at white heat indefinitely. Neither can fear. The human system would not be able to support them at that pitch, without burning itself out. But nature provides safety-valves. What happens next is one of two things — either the conditions creating that hatred

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or fear are removed, doing away with them automatically, or custom, familiarity creeps in by unnoticeable degrees, tempering them, blurring them. Pretty soon the hatred is just a dull red glow. Then it is gone entirely. The subject has become *used* to what once aroused hatred or fear.

And that happened to Donny Blake. He became so accustomed to Rogers that he forgot to be afraid of him — even took to boasting, among his friends, about Rogers's trailing him.

One night, at a hotel back in New York, there was a knock at the door of Rogers's room. He opened it and Blake was standing there.

They stood looking at one another a minute.

A tentative grin flickered around the edges of Blake's mouth. Rogers answered it.

"You doing anything, Rodge?" They were Donny and Rodge to each other now.

"No, come on in," Rogers answered, stepping back.

Donny Blake nonchalantly leaned in at an angle. "Fellow I used to know, guy named Bill Harkness, just dropped into the room. Haven't seen him in years. We been chewing the fat and now we're fresh out of gab. Thought maybe you'd like to come on over and join us in a little three-handed game. What d'ya say?"

"Only for half an hour or so," Rogers answered. "I'm turning in early tonight."

Blake withdrew, leaving the door ajar to speed Rogers on his way in to them. He left his own that way, too, opposite.

When Rogers was ready to go over to the other room, he stopped on the threshold, half in, half out, and yawned undecidedly — the way someone else once had, a long time ago, on his way out to get a midnight edition of a newspaper.

He didn't have to be right at Blake's elbow every night, did he? He could let it ride for one night, couldn't he, out of so many hundreds of them? He'd be just across the hall, and he could leave his door slightly ajar.

He was tired, and that bed looked awfully good. He was a human being, not a machine. He had his moments of let-down, and this was one of them. Nothing was ever going to happen. All he'd managed to accomplish was play the parole officer to Blake, keep him straight. That wasn't what he'd been after.

He was about to change his mind and go back inside his room. But they'd seen him, and Blake waved him on.

"Coming, Rodge? What're you standing there thinking about?"

That decided it. He closed his own door, crossed over, and went in with Blake and his friend Bill Harkness.

They were sitting at the table waiting for him to join them. This Harkness struck him as being engaged in some shady line of business. But that was an easy guess. Anyone on Blake's acquaintance list was bound to be on the other side of the fence.

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He shook hands with Harkness without demur. That was something he'd learned to do since he'd been around Blake — shake hands with all manner of crooks.

Blake, to put them at their ease, trotted out that same worn theme he was so fond of harping on. "Harkness don't wanna believe you used to be a dick. Tell him yourself."

Blake told that to everyone he knew, at every opportunity. He seemed to take a perverse pride in it, as though it reflected a sort of distinction on himself. A detective had once been after him, and he'd tamed him into harmlessness.

"Don't you ever get tired of that?" Rogers grunted. He took up his cards, shot a covert glance at Blake's friend. "No folding money. Only nickels and dimes."

The game wore on desultorily. The night wore on along with it. Just three people at a table, killing time.

Harkness seemed to have a fidgety habit of continually worrying the cuff of his coat sleeve.

"I thought they quit hiding them up there years ago," Blake finally remarked, with a grin. "We're not playing for stakes, anyway."

"No, you don't get it. There's a busted button on my sleeve, and it keeps hooking onto everything every time I reach my arm out."

Only half of the button was left, adhering to the thread, sharp-pointed and annoying as only such trivial things can be. He tried to wrench it off, but there wasn't enough of it left to get a good grip on. All he succeeded in doing was lacerating the edges of his fingers. He swore softly and licked at them.

"Why don't you take the blamed coat off — You don't need it," Blake suggested, without evincing any real interest.

Harkness did, and draped it over the back of his chair.

The game wore on again. The night wore on. Rogers's original half-hour was gone long ago.

Finally the game wore out. They sat there around the table a moment or two longer, half-comatose. Rogers's head was actually beginning to nod. Harkness was the first to speak.

"Look at it — 1 o'clock. Guess I'll shove off." He stood up and got back into his coat. Then he felt at his touseled hair. "Got a comb I can borry before I go?"

Blake, mechanically continuing to shuffle the cards without dealing them any more, said, "In that top drawer over there," without looking around.

The drawer slid out. There was a moment of silence, then they heard Harkness remark: "Old Faithful."

Rogers opened his heavy-lidded eyes and Blake turned his head. Harkness had found Blake's gun in the drawer, had taken it out and was looking it over. "Ain't you afraid of him knowing you've got this?" He grinned at Blake.

"Aw, he's known I've had it for years. He knows I'm licensed for it, too." Then he added sharply, "Quit

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monkeying with it, Harkness. Put it back where it belongs."

"Okay, okay," Harkness consented casually.

He laid the gun down on the bureau scarf, reached for the comb.

Blake turned back again to his card-shuffling. Rogers, who was facing that way, suddenly split his eyes back to full-size at something he saw. The blurred sleepiness suddenly left his voice.

"Hey, that busted button of yours is tangled in the fringe of the scarf — I can see it from here. And the gun's right on the edge. Move it over! You're going to —"

The warning had precisely a reverse effect. It brought on what he'd been trying to avoid. Harkness jerked up his forearm, to look and see for himself. The scarf gave a hitch along its entire length, and the gun slid off into space.

Harkness made a quick stabbing dive for the gun, to try to catch it before it hit the floor. He made it. His mind was quick enough, and so was his muscular coordination. He got it on the drop, in midair, in the short distance between bureau top and floor. But he got it the wrong way, caught at it in the wrong place.

A spark jumped out of his hand and then there was a deep, heavy-throated boom.

For a moment nothing happened. None of them moved. Harkness remained bent over like that, frozen in the position in which he'd grabbed for the gun. Rogers remained seated at the table, staring across it. Blake continued to clutch the cards he'd been shuffling, while his head slowly came around. Rogers, at least, had been a witness to what had happened. Donny Blake had missed seeing that much.

Harkness was moving again. He folded slowly over, until his face was resting on the floor, while he remained arched upward in the middle like a croquet wicket. Then he flattened out, made just a straight line, and lay quiet, as though he were tired.

Rogers jumped up and over to him, got down by him, turned him over.

"Help me carry him over onto the bed!" he said. "It must have hit him —" Then he stopped again.

Blake was still stupidly clutching the deck of cards.

"He's gone," Rogers said, in an oddly blank voice. "It must have got him instantly." He straightened up, still puzzled by the suddenness with which the death had occurred. "I never saw such a freaky —" Then he saw the gun. He stooped for it. "What did you leave it lying around like that for?" he demanded irritably. "Here, take it!" He thrust it at its owner, and Blake's hand closed around it almost unconsciously.

Blake was finally starting to get it. "A fine mess!" he lamented.

He went over to the door, listened. Then he even opened it cautiously, looked out into the hall. The shot apparently hadn't been heard through the thick walls and doors.

He closed the door, came back

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again. He was starting to perspire profusely. Then, as another thought struck him belatedly, he took out a handkerchief and began to mop at himself with something akin to relief. "Hey, it's a good thing you were right in here with the two of us, saw it for yourself. Otherwise you might have thought —"

Rogers kept staring down at the still figure.

Blake came over and touched him on the arm. "Hey, Rodge, maybe you better be the one to report it. It'll look better coming from you. You used to be on the Force yourself."

"All right, I'll handle it," Rogers said with sudden new-found incisiveness. "Let's have the gun." He lined his hand with a folded handkerchief before closing his fist on it.

Blake relinquished it only too willingly, went ahead mopping his face, like someone who has just had the narrowest of narrow escapes.

Rogers asked for his old precinct number.

"Let me have Lieutenant Colton."

In the few moments' wait, Blake said again: "Boy, it's the luckiest thing I ever did to ask you in here with us to —"

Rogers straightened slightly and spoke into the phone. "Rogers reporting back, Lieutenant, after an extended leave of absence without pay. I'm in Room Seven-ten at the Hotel Lancaster, here in the city. I've just been a witness to a murder. Donny Blake has shot to death, with his own gun, a man named William Harkness. Under my own eyes, that's right. Orders, Lieutenant? Very well, I'll hold him until you get here, sir." He hung up.

Blake's face was white. It swelled with dismay. "I wasn't near him! I wasn't touching it! I wasn't even *looking!* I was turned the other way, with my back to — You know that! Rogers, you know it!"

Rogers kept holding Blake's own gun on him, with the handkerchief around it.

"Sure, I know it," he agreed readily. "I know it and you know it. We both know it. You hear me say it to you now, freely, for the last time, while we're still alone here. And after this once, neither God nor man will ever hear me say it again. I've waited a long time for this. Now it's here. You found a loophole once. Now I've found a loophole. Your loophole was to get out. My loophole is to get you back in again.

"Listen to me so you'll understand what I'm doing, Blake. You're going to be arrested in a few minutes for murder. You're going to be tried for murder. You're going to be executed for murder. They're going to call that murder by the name of this man, Harkness. That's the only name that'll be mentioned throughout the proceedings. But the murder you're really about to be arrested, tried, and electrocuted for will be that of a man whose name won't appear in it once, from first to last, from beginning to end — Police Sergeant O'Neill. *That's* the murder you're going to die for now!"

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"Neat use of multiple narrators . . . absorbing if not urgent." (LGO)	". . . this tale is absolutely A-1 in every respect!" (FC)	
". . . regrettable fatuity in defacing talented, vibrant work with non-essential, unoriginal crudities." (DD)	"Premise somewhat strained; fight crowd runs plot ragged. Over-chatty." (SC)	
". . . largely slapstick-bedroom farce . . . puzzle here is of short-story proportions . . ." (LGO)	"Characters less than credible; locked-room mystery fails to jell. Comic strip." (SC)	
"Hard-textured writing and good suspense . . . make the story ring true. B plus." (LGO)	". . . sure craftsmanship . . . down-to-earth realism . . . upward spiral of suspense . . ." (H-M)	
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". . . dazzling . . . technique . . . Thinner than usual but still satisfactory." (LGO)	". . . sound plot, delightful characters and the best in mystery-writing." (FP)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville (Ind.) Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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Mason rushes to a hotel and finds the gi police are looking for. "The man in 851," she sobs. "Wants to KILL me!" then the police burst into the room. " move!" they order. "A man has been in room 851—*you're both wanted for M DER!*"

③ **The Case of the ONE-EYED WITNE**

Mason picks up the phone. A voice "See Carlin tonight. Tell him to ge other partner. *Matter of life and dea* But Carlin never HAD a partner! Ye MURDERED!

④ **The Case of the ANGRY MOURNE**

Belle Adrain, Mason's client, is pale ghost. A witness SWEARS he saw her scene of the murder. And Exhibit "A" *murder* weapon—is Belle's OWN GU

⑤ **The Case of the NEGLIGENT NYMP**

Mason sees a girl escaping George Alder's estate. She him a letter. "Alder wi ANYTHING to get this let she says. "You *must* stop h But someone else beats to it—*by killing Alder!*

⑥ **The Case of the FIERY FING**

Perry's client is on trial for der. The D.A. flings a packa front of the accused woman collapses. The jury is rea send her to the chair—but comes up with a surprise pa of his own!

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